

*A Flaming Novel of Rebels, Rogues and Their
Loves—on the Eve of Revolution by Bart Spicer*

The Day Before Thunder





NEW YORK WAS A POWDER KEG
ON REVOLUTION EVE . . .

*and James Coult had the match in his
grand London waistcoat.*

*He came—a gentleman banker—to a raw,
young world, with proper proud disdain
for the rebels to the King.*

*But then he met Luisa—
and his eyes began to open.*

*He saw a dark patrician beauty barter
honor with a scoundrel . . .*

*He saw a rogue smuggler crush a
valiant people's hopes . . .*

*He saw the unquenchable spirit of
a nation poised for freedom . . .*

*And James' fiery Scots spirit rose in answer to the call
of men ready to fight—and to die—
for a bright new world . . .*

The Day Before Thunder

by Bart Spicer



*This low-priced Bantam Book
has been completely reset in a type face
designed for easy reading, and was printed
from new plates. It contains the complete
text of the original hard-cover edition.
NOT ONE WORD HAS BEEN OMITTED.*



THE DAY BEFORE THUNDER

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THE DAY BEFORE THUNDER

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BART SPICER was born in Virginia. His early years were spent in England. At various times he has worked for newspapers, radio and public relations. During World War II he enlisted as a private and rose to the rank of captain in the South Pacific, winning three medals and five combat stars.

In addition to his popular "Carney Wilde" detective stories, Bart Spicer has written a number of historical novels, including *The Wild Ohio* and *The Tall Captains*. He is also the author of the recent bestseller, *Act of Anger*.

◀ CHAPTER 1 ▶

WITH A GROWING sense of urgency James Coult ignored the slippery steps of the Whitehall Stairs. He plunged recklessly down the treacherous stone treads and signalled a two-oared wherry hovering upstream. He stepped down into the waist before the bowman could steady the boat against the wharf.

"London Bridge, and quickly. An extra shilling if you put your backs into it."

The bowman knuckled his forehead, man-o'-war fashion. He grinned and motioned stroke oar to give way. A raw, windy February day would have brought little casual trade to the river and with the lowering dusk he and his mate had probably given up all hope of profit. He settled himself and pushed off into the swift current.

Stroke oar leaned back to offer a folded tarpaulin. James Coult took it gratefully and draped it over his cloak. The brisk wind that boomed through the streets was almost a gale along the Thames. The evening tide was making upriver against the wind. Thin sharp streamers of spray lanced through a growing fog. James leaned forward, squinting, his hat braced low across his eyebrows. Behind him stroke oar grunted heavily with each pull, and the small boat danced on the choppy water.

Around the bend silhouettes of churches in the Strand stood out sharply incisive against a hard grey sky but beyond Blackfriars Bridge the world was dark, misted, chilled with months-old snow, reeking of soot and horses and tidal stench.

James Coult gave the view no attention. The river afforded the quickest route between Whitehall and the City, and the trip was by now too familiar for notice. He huddled under the heavy tarpaulin, staring down at the black bilgewater lapping at the footboards, caught in a young man's gloomy introspection. What he had witnessed this afternoon from his narrow cramped pew in the short gallery overlooking the

great chamber of the House of Lords might mean the end of the world he felt he was beginning to understand. The raging shouts of savage triumph that closed the session had touched him with cold, shadowy apprehension. No man could guess what might follow now, but many fools seemed to welcome the change.

Uncle Ruthven would interpret it correctly, James felt sure. During his brief few years in London he had seen the old gentleman apply himself to problems that seemed insoluble to James, showing him the simple, profitable answer with a languid ease. Uncle Ruthven would understand what had happened today, and why, and he would know exactly what action should be taken by Coult and Company.

Little more than two years ago when he had first seen London, James had been green as all boys dame-schooled in Sussex are green. A trying, miserable year at Oxford had taught him only to guard his tongue. His education had truly begun when Uncle Ruthven brought him to Town.

In his ignorance James had then known of only one aristocracy in England. But London had shown him another, the half-admitted, half-submerged aristocracy of the merchant. Lords by birth might—and did—direct the King's government. But merchant princes directed all of England.

In the short eighty years since a Scottish banker had founded the Bank of England, the reins of power had passed from nobility to finance. And among the merchant-bankers as an admitted peer was the House of Coult.

In some miraculous fashion Uncle Ruthven had kept his bank and himself free of any association with the disastrous Jacobite turmoil of past years, and many Londoners would have been surprised to learn that Sir Ruthven Coult was not only Scottish but a member of a violent, wild-fighting clan fanatically loyal to the Stuart cause. Knowing all that, James even as a young boy, had been able to understand why Uncle Ruthven had insisted that he be educated in the south of England. No Scot, no man who spoke with a hint of the harsh Gaelic tone, would find genuine welcome in London during this generation.

It had taken James some time to appreciate the position his uncle occupied. He had not been surprised when elderly gentlemen would seize his hand warmly upon first acquaintance and insist he share a bottle of fine Madeira with them. James had put it down to the generous impulses of his uncle's friends. Uncle Ruthven's standing in the City had naturally assured his cordial reception at the Royal Exchange. And when domineering matrons with marriageable daughters flooded the post with invitations, James felt such attention

was due to his uncle's wealth. Occasionally an up-country client, some rural lord on a rare visit to London, would thump his back, offer him snuff and call him "Young Coult," as if they'd been friends for years.

At any club in London, someone was sure to recognize him, and make an opportunity to introduce him to a crowd of strangers. "Young Coult doesn't know me," the man would chuckle, "but I know him. Carved from the same granite as old Ruthven, eh? Know him anywhere." And when the stranger had identified himself, there would invariably follow an invitation to call at any time, to join in a racing party, or take a hand at baccarat.

James Coult came slowly to accept the fact that through Coult and Company he had become a part of London, despite his brief residence. Shopkeepers and clerks recognized him immediately. Linksmen, Bow Street Runners and chairmen saluted him casually as they did Sir Ruthven. A seat by the fire could be found for James in any coffee house and men three times his age and capacity would listen attentively, speculatively, whenever he spoke.

London was laying a strong claim on him, James often felt. And in that vast, exciting, corrupt, boisterous city, his position was never called into question. The soot-grimed windows of Coult and Company looked across Lombard Street to the entrance of Lloyd's Coffee House. Among the insurance syndicates there, Coult's held a large investment. The rear passage door let onto Exchange Alley and along to the Royal Exchange where Coult and Company recognized few equals and no superiors. A short step from the door brought a distant view of the Great Pool of London, that immense tidal basin where shipping from all the world clustered in disorderly ranks. Coastal traders, fishing trawlers, East Indiamen flying John Company's pendant, brigs, sloops, pinks, barks and schooners from the American colonies, from both the Indies, from every port known to man were gathered here. And a Coult's investment sailed with almost every ship.

The slow rhythmic grunting of stroke oar grew quicker and sharper as the rowers fought the tide. They bawled hoarse, obscene encouragement to each other, battling for distance with short hard lunges. The bowman swivelled his head for a glance at the Bridge and shouted a warning to stroke. Slowly the boat edged toward the left bank, maintaining an almost head-on course to avoid the danger of broaching-to in the swift cascade that funneled through the narrow arches of London Bridge. Four quick grunting pulls brought them alongside the Stairs. James rose impatiently, tossing back the tarpaulin. He dropped three shillings into

the bowman's outstretched palm and jumped to the landing. He ran up the slimed steps to the street.

The Tower's massive gloomy bulk broke the freshening wind and it seemed less cold to James as he went up the slope with long quick strides. Hard rocklike snow crunched under his shoes. Out in the cobbled roadways the snow had worn away except in the gutters, but the tilted, uneven sidewalks were treacherous with their coating of soot-blackened snow. It was easy walking when he turned left into Lombard Street, for here shivering clerks had been herded outside each morning to sweep the walks clear.

Uncle Ruthven would still be in his office, James was sure. For all his studied pretense of indolence, Uncle Ruthven kept longer hours than his overworked clerks.

"Jamie," he would say slyly, prodding his bony nose with a long bony finger, "in London semblance is more highly regarded than substance. Entertain often, wager high, make frequent appearances at the clubs, and no man will ever believe you are laboring like a slavey. In London gentlemen do not work, so be very careful that no one ever catches you at it."

No one had ever managed to catch Uncle Ruthven at it, James admitted to himself with an admiring nod.

"We are the kind of bankers our clients want us to be," Uncle Ruthven insisted. "Smugglers, thieves or honest merchants, all come to us because they know we will give them our total loyalty. In essence, that is all Coult and Company can offer that is not available from any other banking house. Never forget that, Jamie. Complete integrity, complete loyalty. But it is equally necessary for you to establish yourself with the younger blades of Town. They will come into control of their inheritances soon enough and they will bring their affairs only to a man they know and trust. See that you live well, Jamie, and just a bit extravagantly. Give a caller a good bottle of wine and let him find you busy with a tailor fitting you with the latest thing in coats and a print peddler with his wares spread out for your attention. Keep the best horse you can find. Gamble carefully, but high always. Pay your losses promptly in coin and never let a man evade paying you when you win. And when your time comes, Jamie, the House of Coult will still be first in the City."

It was a fine life, James admitted willingly, though still bewildering and often distasteful. He was expected to be far cleverer than he could normally manage. He had much still to learn but Uncle Ruthven was a knowing, gifted teacher, and a generous one. For all its size, he had discovered, Lon-

don was a small town. The people of importance were few here as they were everywhere. James knew most of them and those he had not met, knew him. But through the boisterous, active life demanded of a young gentleman of fashion ran the constant reminder of the name he bore and the responsibility that would soon be his.

"I want you to be part of it all," Uncle Ruthven always told him. "Spend what time you can on 'Change and in the countinghouses with merchants and bankers. But never forget that your main purpose for the next few years is to make a name for yourself with your own generation. Be a little more stable than most but not so much so that you will draw offensive comment. And in Heaven's name go buy yourself a chaise that rolls faster than that rattling trap you're driving now. I passed you easily in my coach yesterday and I don't want people passing you without a race."

And even when James felt himself engrossed in Uncle Ruthven's plans, eager to take an active part, he found himself turned off with a casual flippancy, an invitation to dinner to meet the newest darlings of Drury Lane, a summons to take part in the Corinthian Club's next coach race, or join an expedition to the Vauxhall Gardens.

"Will Spain fight to keep us out of the East Indies trade, Uncle?" James would ask. And his uncle would shrug easily and tuck a pinch of snuff into one nostril. "The Spanish are always at war with someone, Jamie. A frenzied, factious people, much like the Irish. Or the Scots," he added with a dry little laugh. "I don't care for your new cravat, my boy. It seems a bit flat to my eye. The Macaroni Club would disown you. Try one that fluffs out more under the chin."

James' long fast strides had brought him to the entrance and he paused a moment to compose himself. It would never do to show himself excited or disturbed. Above all else, the English prided themselves upon imperturbability, and James was forcing himself to conform to his world. More and more of late he had found himself consciously aware that he was playing a part that did not quite suit him.

The entrance foyer was crowded as always, but none of these people had come to see Uncle Ruthven, James was sure. For no deserving client ever had to wait for Uncle Ruthven. The broad-faced former sergeant-major who guarded the door had a crew of three runners, small eager boys in brass buttons, who were sped promptly to inform Uncle Ruthven if any client appeared who was worthy of his attention. Such a client was shown immediately, with great deference, to Uncle Ruthven's magnificent room. Or, if he were occupied, to a small anteroom where Uncle Ruthven appeared quickly

to offer a soft chair before a fire, a glass of excellent wine, one of the many volumes of salacious French prints that were much in vogue, and his apologies. Comfortable clients were never annoyed at being left to wait in such surroundings. Many often returned to the anteroom when their business was concluded to finish a good bottle or peer a while longer at the saucy pictures.

An alert buttons scuttled across to James as he came in the door, to take his hat and cloak. They would be brushed and hung on forms in a closet until he was ready to leave. James glanced at his reflection in the glass above the fireplace, fluttered his fingers at his throat to adjust his cravat, and drew the laced facings of his bright velvet coat closer together at his waist. The buttons knelt to rub a cloth vigorously across the gold buckles of his shoes.

Of the waiting clients none was familiar to him. James moved down the long room toward the corridor that led to Uncle Ruthven's room. He wagged a finger at the retired sergeant-major and lifted his eyebrows. Very slowly, with the dignity possible only to a veteran Guardsman, the sergeant-major nodded, almost bowing from his watch-chair. Uncle Ruthven was in, and was alone, as James had hoped.

Along the dark-paneled corridor, small glass panes gave flickering glimpses of the big counting-room and the row of cubicles used by the clerks. Even while moving at a fast pace James could see that every man was at his post, crouched over his work under the basilisk eye of the wizened chief clerk who sat at a high desk in the exact center of the long room. Here two Dutch stoves kept the clerks reasonably comfortable, but in the rooms of the upper two storeys, apprentices would be shivering, their stiff fingers blue with chill and stumbling over long complicated rows of figures. A miserable, grinding life most of those people had, James realized. Uncle Ruthven felt that the profits of Coult and Company were reserved for Coult, not clerks.

A scampering buttons pounded along the corridor, passing James with a bow that twisted his neck precariously, and skidding to a halt before Uncle Ruthven's closed door. He tapped discreetly and entered when he was bade. James followed on his heels.

Uncle Ruthven's paneled room was an office only because Uncle Ruthven said it was. The only vaguely clerical item visible was a dainty fruitwood writing table slightly larger than those used by most gentlemen at home. Two fireplaces in opposing walls cast a pleasant flickering glow across an intricately patterned Persian rug. A circular table held scattered newspapers and magazines, a casual grouping of bottles

and decanters, several tobacco jars, a rack of new pipes. Uncle Ruthven was standing at the chimneypiece beyond his table, reading the note brought by the buttons. He nodded absently to James and told the boy, "Escort the gentleman to me at once."

James hesitated near the door, standing aside to let the boy pass. "Shall I—"

"No. Stay, Jamie, by all means," Sir Ruthven said cordially. "A French gentleman is calling. A clever fellow, in a loose manner of speaking. It may be instructive for you." He smiled briefly. "Do I sense a certain eagerness about you?"

"Yes, sir," James said. "I have been to—"

Sir Ruthven lifted a languid hand to interrupt. "I think we'd best defer your news for the moment. Until our caller has gone, eh? Pay particular attention, please. I will be grateful for your opinion of him."

Bulky, big-nosed and immensely confident, Sir Ruthven lounged against the marble chimney piece, toying with a white-barred quill, twisting the springy nib in his fingers. He glanced up with a studied air of casualness that James was beginning now to recognize. The more important the problem, the more weary Uncle Ruthven seemed. Pretending a weighty boredom, an inability to concentrate, Uncle Ruthven was the image of thick-headed, amiable stupidity. It was probably his most valuable professional asset, James thought. There was no hint of fierce Highland heritage about Uncle Ruthven at such times, nor anything but the most fashionable, drawling intonation to his voice. A model of a London nincompoop, a man certain to make any client convinced of his own superiority.

While they waited Sir Ruthven tossed the pen aside, reached across his table and drew up a large shield of tooled Cordovan that fitted perfectly over his tabletop. All ledgers and papers were now discreetly out of sight and the office seemed a gentleman's retreat. Sir Ruthven moved lazily to the table across the room, took a pipe from the rack and packed it from a jar, tamping the tobacco shred by shred and testing the draft often with a pull at the bit. This was how he wanted his caller to find him, James realized, and he moved to join him, lifting the silver knob of a decanter and picking up a long-stemmed glass from the cluster on the table.

"A splash of Madeira, Uncle?"

"Not that stuff, Jamie. It's just sickening sugar-water. Pour me a touch of the '45 port. An excellent vintage for port—"

"But a tragic year otherwise, was it not, Sir Ruthven?" A sharp, peculiarly inflected voice spoke from the doorway and James turned too quickly, spilling some of the wine on his

fingers. "So kind of you to let me come without an appointment, my dear sir."

"It is always a pleasure, Count," Sir Ruthven said warmly. "Allow me the honor of presenting my young nephew, James Coult."

"I did not need the introduction, sir," the Count replied. "The family resemblance is very strong."

"Poor fellow," Sir Ruthven chuckled. "So sadly true. Count d'Array, Jamie. One of His Most Christian Majesty's emissaries to the Court of Saint James."

"You do too much honor to a mere attaché," the Count murmured. He bowed low, making a pretty play with his handkerchief, nearly dusting the floor with it, then, when he had straightened, using a lacy corner to stroke his waxed mustaches into perfect alignment.

He was tall and slim, willowy with that feline grace so admired at the French court. He moved lithely as a fencing master. He was dressed rather ornately for the City, but James supposed that ambassadorial attachés very likely had to meet high standards of attire. The Count's blue velvet coat was ornamented with hundreds of embroidered gold love-knots. The pattern was prettily reversed for his waistcoat. His left hand rested lightly on the hilt of a rapier that was far too long for a court-sword. And too efficient as well, James suspected, when he noticed the gold-and-ivory grip that was nicked and yellowed with hard use. It was a dangerous, ornamental weapon. And much the same might be said for the Count himself.

"Jamie, hand the Count a fresh pipe. I'm having some of the old port. Will you join me or would you prefer—"

"One might almost call it the wine of the country," the Count said in a soft tone. "Port by all means, Sir Ruthven."

He took the glass from James and nodded his thanks. He was smiling still, but his pale narrowed eyes were expressionless, watchful and very cold.

He joined Sir Ruthven in front of the fire, settling into a brocade-covered armchair with a small sound of pleasurable fatigue. But the man was all whalebone and gristle, James noted. A hundred miles in the saddle probably wouldn't tire him. So his languor must be as spurious as Uncle Ruthven's. James leaned negligently against the table and busied himself with pipe and tobacco.

"A sudden impulse struck me," the Count said easily. "I thought of stopping to see you, my dear Sir Ruthven just as I was passing Bow Church. I told my man to turn back. I couldn't miss this chance of seeing you in your famous lair."

"A tedious place," Sir Ruthven murmured. He held up his

glass and squinted through it at the fire. "I was half asleep with boredom. So kind of you to call, Count. I sincerely hope you have not brought some business for me? I hate the thought of stirring from the fire today."

Two very convincing liars, James thought. But of them, Uncle Ruthven was the more adept at creating the image he wished Count d'Array to accept. The Count was handicapped by his thin-faced tension, his habitual air of cold authority that told you more clearly than words that he was not a man to waste his time on trifles. But he joined lazily in Uncle Ruthven's meandering conversations, showing no less interest in Lord Burnaby's latest hare-brained escapade than he did in Dr. Franklin's amazing new experiments. James sensed a nervous intensity in him, but the Count cloaked it well, holding his hands still and speaking in a slow, casual voice. When he asked a question he gave it no emphasis but the mere fact that he offered a subject for discussion alerted James.

"I called a day or so ago to see our friend Mr. Gerardus Bols and was rather surprised to hear that he has closed his house. I don't suppose you have any idea where he might have gone?"

Sir Ruthven murmured drowsily, staring at the fire. "Mr. Gerardus Bols? Can't place him at the moment. Dutchie, I suppose?"

"One would assume so," the Count agreed. "I have met him only in London. At White's Coffee House, mostly."

"Ah," Sir Ruthven said. "I could send a note around to White's, if you like, Count. Only too pleased. If anyone there—"

"I have already inquired," the Count said curtly.

"Pity. Well, if he's a Dutchie, he's most likely gone to Holland, or wherever the Dutchies go."

Count d'Array drained his glass and set it on the table. "Very likely," he said in a milder tone. "Now I fear I must be on my way again. His Excellency is expecting me to dine this evening. Tedious, but there's nothing one can do about it."

"So good to see you again, Count. Please call any time you find yourself free. I sit here pretending to occupy myself and go slowly mad with inactivity. You've no idea how stimulating it is to have someone drop in." Sir Ruthven escorted the Count to the door and held it for him.

"I hope we shall meet again soon," the Count said to James. He bowed to Sir Ruthven and left slowly, sauntering along the corridor. The light crisp sound of his heels echoed until the door was closed behind him.

Sir Ruthven returned to the table, filled his glass again and slumped down in his chair. Then he twisted his head to one side and cocked an eyebrow at James. "Well?"

"I feel a little sorry for Mr. Gerardus Bols," James said.

"Ah, you caught the menace, did you?" Sir Ruthven chuckled. "The French ministry's best duellist, that's d'Array. Not a bad fellow, actually, but a trifle too willing to use that sword of his. A dangerously capable man, d'Array, and incorruptible, from all accounts. Stay away from him if you can, Jamie."

"I think I can manage that," James said dryly. "Who is Mr. Bols, Uncle? Do you know?"

"Of course I know," Sir Ruthven snorted. "A Dutch trader, largely a smuggler. He fishes in troubled waters and nets some rather sizeable catches now and again. A born intriguer, like all the Dutch. Until last year he was engaged in smuggling untaxed tea into the American colonies. Though why that should concern the French, I'm blessed if I know. Still, d'Array delivered a clear warning. Keep away from Gerardus Bols, or share his fate, whatever that may be."

"And will you, Uncle? Keep away from Bols, I mean?"

"Probably, Jamie," Sir Ruthven said casually. "Not because of d'Array's warning, but merely because Bols is not quite trustworthy. I have had dealings with him in the past, quite profitable ones for the most part. We have no interest in common at the moment. Obviously he is currently up to some scoundrelly activity that engages d'Array's attention, but it is no concern of mine. I'll hear about it soon enough."

"It all amuses you, doesn't it, Uncle?"

"In a way, Jamie. In a way. I don't intend to become involved in these minor, hole-in-corner affairs. People seem to think that Coult and Company have a finger in every pie. That's not quite true, my boy. I am an indolent man at heart, far too lazy to join in all of Bols' grubby little schemes. Dismiss him from your mind, Jamie, and tell me how you have been amusing yourself today."

James pulled a chair close to his uncle's and perched eagerly on the forward edge. "I spent most of the day at the House of Lords."

"Good Heavens," Sir Ruthven murmured. "You take an eccentric attitude toward amusement. Why trouble, dear boy? I could have told you—"

"I doubt if you could have told me this, Uncle," James went on quickly. "Pitt spoke for an hour. The Great Commoner himself."

"Fancy that," Sir Ruthven grunted. "But since it was at the Lords, let's give him his title, Jamie."

"Yes, sir. The Earl of Chatham, I mean. He was just as you've described him, sir. Wrapped in furs and flannels, limping with gout, all fustian and bombast, and that immense nose stabbing around the chamber like a falcon hunting for meat."

"An excellent figure, Jamie. I can see him now. And what was Chatham's subject today? My God, it must be all of two years since he was last in London."

"He brought Dr. Franklin as his guest. His subject was the American colonies."

Sir Ruthven grunted again. He straightened in his chair and opened both eyes. "Go on."

"I heard about it last night at Lord Clarges' dinner and this morning I went up and hauled Clarges out of bed and made him take me as his guest."

Sir Ruthven chuckled softly. "I'll wager Clarges didn't stay the course, did he?"

"He left while Pitt—Chatham, excuse me—was still speaking."

"I must look to my sources of information," Sir Ruthven said quietly. "I should have known of this."

"I believe it was a well-kept secret, Uncle. Fairly well-kept. Chatham wanted to present his proposals before a coalition could be formed to oppose him. I'd guess he kept his secret so well that he didn't organize any support, either."

"And his proposal? Repeal the restrictive acts on colonial trade, especially the Boston Port Bill. Allow the colonies to levy their own taxes. What else?"

James smiled. "I could almost believe you were there, sir. The only other major suggestion was that the Continental Congress be confirmed as a permanent body."

"Very sensible. So the noble and puissant lords shouted him out of the chamber, I suppose?"

James stared at his uncle for a long quiet moment. "Yes, sir," he said finally. "And Lord Sandwich pointed out Dr. Franklin and identified him as the man who wrote Chatham's speech."

"As of course he had."

"Possibly so, Uncle, but I have never in my life heard such violent abuse directed at any man. I would have called Sandwich out if he'd said half of that about me. But Dr. Franklin sat there like a man made of stone. Not a muscle moved. He might have been deaf, for all I could tell."

"No," Sir Ruthven said with a shake of his head. "No, he's not deaf, but he is a sly old fox. I've seldom seen a man who took my fancy so completely. If America produces many men like Benjamin Franklin, it will become the wonder of

the world. There are very few complete men, Jamie. Whenever you meet one, honor him well."

"Yes, sir. I remember meeting him here last year, but I didn't have much chance to talk to him."

"A charming fellow with a nice, salacious turn of wit that catches one by surprise at times. But he's none of your rebellious fire-eaters; he understands the world too well. In any honest contest he'd make mincemeat of Sandwich, as he did at the Privy Council last year. I'm not surprised that he endured the noble lord's abuse in silence. Dr. Franklin holds his passions under a tight rein most of the time. But didn't Chatham rise to his defense?"

"Yes, sir. He replied magnificently. Dr. Franklin seemed to breathe a little easier after that. But it did no good. In fact, it made matters even worse. By the time the Ministers had finished, they had forced the Lords to deny all of New England the right to trade anywhere."

Sir Ruthven made a snorting sound.

"And then they voted to send an additional six thousand troops to reinforce the British garrisons in the colonies."

"The fools!" Sir Ruthven's voice was little more than a whisper.

James sat silently, his hands clenched tightly, watching his uncle's taut, thoughtful face. All the apprehension he had felt during the long heated debate in the House of Lords came flooding into his mind again. "Will it mean war, Uncle?"

Slowly, Sir Ruthven shrugged. "Possibly not," he said carefully. "But war or no, it certainly means that every investment in the American colonies will be worthless in a matter of months."

"But, Uncle," James protested, "those people were rabid. You've no idea how they screamed and cheered when Sandwich—"

"I know the noble lords," Sir Ruthven said in a tone that was as close to a sneer as he ever permitted himself. "I have seen them only too often. But I do not concern myself with English wars, Jamie. Any Scot would be a fool to—"

He broke off warily when a timid fingernail scratched at his door. "Come," he called lazily.

The fresh-faced buttons moved awkwardly around the edge of the door and came forward, holding out a square, sealed package. "The New York post just come in, Your Honor. Muster McLaglen said I should—" His voice dried in his throat as Sir Ruthven peered at him quizzically.

"Something for me, is there? Take it, Jamie, please."

James held out a hand and let the boy drop the packet in

his palm. When Sir Ruthven nodded, the boy scuttled down the corridor to his station again.

James passed the packet to his uncle, but even in that brief time he was able to identify the embossed imprint in the sealing wax. The arrogant stallion's head with its flared nostrils and bared teeth had been the Coult family seal since the days of The Bruce.

Sir Ruthven ripped the cover free and dropped it in the fire. He unfolded the letter with a casual flip and spread it on his knee.

"My brother Douglas writes a long letter," he said in a tone of mild complaint. "I'll just glance at it to see if—"

Sir Ruthven's voice dwindled slowly as he read. James got up to leave him in reasonable privacy. He refilled both glasses and bent to light his pipe from a candle flame.

"God condemn that witless man!" Sir Ruthven jumped to his feet and stamped angrily across the big room.

James put his pipe down and turned to watch him.

His uncle rifled through the long letter with nervous fingers, reading as he moved impatiently up and down the room. Then he folded the sheets together again, slid the packet into the pocket of his coat and went back to his chair by the fire.

He sat stiffly, uncomfortably, his hands cupping his knees as he stared at the flickering sea-coal embers. When he spoke his voice seemed to come from a far distance, hollowly.

"I will need you, Jamie. Come to dinner at my house this evening. I will have to consider our position carefully, but I will be prepared for you then. I hope you are not engaged?"

"Nothing of importance, Uncle," James said promptly. "Is it—bad news?"

"I don't imagine it could be worse," Sir Ruthven muttered. He blinked his eyes and turned to look at James. "How would you like to go to New York Province, Jamie?"

◀ CHAPTER 2 ▶

UNCLE RUTHVEN had not been in good form this evening, James felt, as he waited, shivering in his thin cloak while

Crutchfield brought his new chaise around from the mews. They had dined alone in the high-vaulted chamber where fifty guests might have been seated comfortably. Uncle Ruthven must have cancelled a dinner party, James guessed, for the supply of Dunstable oysters had been unlimited and the turbot presented for Uncle Ruthven's approval was enormous, filling a great platter in its new-fangled French dressing. His uncle had picked and toyed nervously with his food, putting off all serious talk until afterward, but somehow he had been unable to maintain the cheerful, sprightly flippancy so rightly considered conducive to good digestion. Even with his ravenous appetite James had made only a dent in the huge dishes the butler carried around the table. There would be a feast in the servants' hall tonight, he suspected.

When the cloth had been pulled and decanters set out with bowls of nuts and fruit, James had shifted to a chair beside his uncle, feeling a vague sense of alarm at the appearance of that usually smiling, confident man. Sir Ruthven had finished the best part of a bottle of claret single-handed but he had taken little food. He poured himself a brimming glass of port and shoved the wheeled decanter cart along to James. He sat morosely still, his head low, staring blindly at the bare polished table. After a moment he sighed. That mild, totally uncharacteristic sound was almost startling, coming from Sir Ruthven.

"Jamie, what do you know of your uncle Douglas?" he asked in a voice that was hoarsened with wine and—something else.

"Very little, sir," James said truthfully. He had been searching his memory since he had left his uncle's City office, but to him Douglas Coult was merely a name; no face was associated with it. "I know he lives in New York and controls a branch of Coult and Company but I have never heard—"

"He went to New York after the '45," Sir Ruthven said heavily. He was not interrupting, James realized; he genuinely had not heard what James had said. "He was the hotspur among us, a firebrand out to consume the world with his fury. Well, he fought well, let us give him that honor. We know he fought well because Prince Charles Edward has been pleased more than once to say so. After the '45, he ran, as all defenders of the Stuarts ran, those who were not be-headed."

Sir Ruthven traced around the rim of his glass with a long, unsteady finger. He drew in a slow, deep breath. "Somehow," he went on quietly, "Douglas found his way to Spain where he lived for several years. There he married a Spanish widow

of excellent station and adopted her infant daughter. At the time I was unable to help him. I didn't dare help him. The truth is that I didn't want to. However, when he removed to the American colonies and settled in New York, he was at his wit's end. His wife brought her daughter, Luisa, to visit me in London and ask for my assistance. She was a delightful, eloquent creature, as charming as she was beautiful. I was deeply sorrowed when I heard of her death a few years ago. I will confess that I was not greatly touched by Douglas' plight, but his wife's eloquence, and the sweet grace of his stepdaughter were enough to make me reconsider. The bitterness I had felt earlier no longer tormented me. In any event, I was persuaded to establish him in the New York branch of Coult and Company." Sir Ruthven looked up. "Is all that clear to you?"

"Reasonably clear, Uncle."

"Excellent. Give me your attention now. The letter I received from Douglas today was important for two reasons. One, because he told me something, namely that he has taken a new partner whose name he does not mention. Secondly, because he omitted to inform me of something vitally important to the welfare of the House of Coult."

Sir Ruthven paused to drain his glass. He waggled a finger for the decanter, filling his glass again. His faint slow smile when he glanced at James was quizzical, almost mocking.

"You're a cautious, slow-talking boy, Jamie," he said. "I like that. It's an admirable trait in a banker. But don't overdo. You're full of questions, aren't you?"

James nodded. "Yes, Uncle. But I know you'll tell me what I need to hear."

Sir Ruthven almost laughed. "At first blush one would think you rather diffident, even shy. But you aren't shy, are you, Jamie? I have it on Lady Gaynor's authority that you aren't at all shy. And what was that I heard about a duel last week?"

"It was nothing, sir," James said in a voice tightened by embarrassment. "I was compelled to call out a lying rascal at Almack's. During the night his friends induced him to apologize and I thought it best to accept. There was no duel."

"Even better," Sir Ruthven beamed. "You have gained immense credit amongst the rakehellies without facing personal danger. A splendid bargain. For some time I have been thinking that you might be ready to assume larger responsibilities. I have bright, ambitious young assistants by the score, but many of our concerns are so deeply confidential

that only a member of the family could be entrusted with them. It can't be any secret to you that I have been watching you hopefully?"

"It's no secret, Uncle."

"I have decided to send you to New York. The difficulty with my brother is quite as much a family matter as a commercial one. Either you or I must deal with it, and I cannot leave London at this season. I think you had best take passage on the next mail packet from Falmouth. It leaves in three days. There will be no other ship to New York for two weeks, and this matter will not wait. I will lend you my big German travelling coach for the trip to Falmouth. You should plan to leave tomorrow afternoon. Even earlier if possible."

"Yes, sir," James said readily. He had been mentally preparing himself for something of the sort all evening. "What am I to do in New York?"

"I want you to purchase my brother's share of the New York branch and then advise me whether to close it down. Fill your glass, Jamie. You won't find port like this in New York."

"But I don't know—"

"Of course you don't," Sir Ruthven said amiably. "I will tell you what I can, but in the main you must trust your own judgment. You are a Coult and you must have some of the family instinct. Now is as good a time as any to test it."

Sir Ruthven rubbed his nose thoughtfully and offered a bleak smile to his nephew. "You will find your Uncle Douglas is a leading figure in New York. Quite the provincial man of fashion, a formidable gambler on the racecourse as he is on 'Change. Not as commanding as the Beekmans or De-Lanceys, of course, but important in his way. He is more merchant than banker, for since no colonial company is permitted to issue paper money, there is little banking as we know it. As a merchant Douglas made a tidy fortune during King George's War, mostly through outfitting privateers against the French. He made so much profit in fact, that I was persuaded to let him increase his share of the New York business from one-third to two-thirds. Hence our present difficulty. But Douglas' years of profit were finished with the end of the war. That is not to his discredit, however. No colonial merchant has done well since then, due to the incredible stupidity of the King's ministers who believe that restrictions are encouraging to commerce. Because he has seen little profit of late, Douglas has from time to time borrowed money from me. The total indebtedness is now some ten thousand pounds. I have never pressed him for it

but I shall now, if he refuses to sell. That is one of the weapons you will have, Jamie, but I would like you to hold it in reserve as long as possible."

"Yes, sir," James said cautiously.

"Do you understand what has happened lately to colonial trade?"

"Not very well, Uncle."

"Well, you'll learn in time," Sir Ruthven said casually. "At the moment the most important factor is the non-importation agreement adopted in the Continental Congress last September. It was an infantile sort of reprisal for the Boston Port Bill. As long as the Americans hold to it, legal commerce will be seriously hampered."

"How long will it last, sir?"

"God alone could say, my boy. The colonies of course, cannot exist without trade. They make almost nothing; they don't even have a local supply of salt. They must trade, or die. The fact is that almost as much commerce is being carried on now as before, but it is illicit, dangerous and often not profitable. I should say that the colonies will either gain their objective this spring, or abandon nonimportation. It was used successfully once before with the Stamp Act, but it won't work a second time."

"They must be strange people, sir, to cut their own purses."

Sir Ruthven shifted his heavy shoulders impatiently. "No," he said bluntly. "They are tormented people, full of grievances, easily led by flap-mouthed rabble, but they are not fools, Jamie. Do not be misled by the stupid notions of America you will hear from your fashionable English friends. The country is not entirely civilized, but it is much more than a wilderness of great trees, fierce animals and red savages. Its cities are wondrous for a land so recently settled. There are five great centers of wealth and culture that dominate the continent. These are Philadelphia, the largest city of the British Empire, saving only London itself, with a population of some forty thousand. Next in importance is New York with twenty-five thousand, followed in rank by Boston, Newport and Charles Town. Five cities that command American commerce. The House of Coult has close ties with the Powells and Morrisons of Philadelphia, the Redwoods and Banisters of Newport, the Wraggs and Manigaults of Charles Town. Through sentiment, we have concentrated all our New York interests in my brother's branch. That was a serious error. I am sending you to correct the situation."

"But just what is the situation, Uncle?"

Sir Ruthven stroked his long smooth jaw, pursing his thin-

lipped mouth as he measured his nephew. "First, another word about Americans, Jamie. You will have seen in London that considerable power rests with bankers. In America you will find that almost all power rests with the merchants. In each colony a small party of King's men hold office, but for the most part they are impotent to enforce any decision. There is no American aristocracy other than the merchant. Merchants are the only rich men and the only ones with leisure. Many planters may dispose of equal or greater wealth but the duties of plantation economy require constant supervision, while a merchant may dispose of his daily routine in two or three hours. Many actually live in virtual retirement, leaving all work to their clerks. This situation affords a merchant ample time to pursue other interests." Sir Ruthven eyed James seriously. "Especially politics. The provincial assemblies are dominated by wealthy merchants."

James nodded his understanding.

"Such merchants maintain very close contacts with each other," Sir Ruthven went on slowly. "They will always work in concert whenever the enterprise is important enough. Their families intermarry like nobility and a blow to one is a blow to all. Within their ranks, secrets are kept. But Douglas is merely on the perimeter of this group, not actually of the inner core, despite his association with Coult and Company. I know that his Spanish wife was never well regarded by the sober Dutch and English matrons of New York; too fragrant a flower for that climate, I suspect. And his step-daughter is probably suffering from the same delightful incapacity, which must be rather trying for Douglas. The point I am making is that a secret involving Douglas would not necessarily be kept by his colleagues."

James nodded again. From his uncle's tone he knew this was the crux of his problem.

"Such a secret has reached my ears, Jamie. Each quarter through the year, Douglas sends me a report of his transactions and his anticipations. The secret enterprise with which he is associated has never yet been mentioned in his reports."

James waited patiently. If his uncle meant to tell him more he would proceed without prodding.

"My brother Douglas has illegally invested some thirty thousand pounds in muskets, in gunpowder, in rolls of lead for shot, and other munitions. The thirty-thousand-pound reserve he claims to have on hand has already been expended. He issued bills of exchange, hoping they would not be presented for payment immediately. But some have already reached me. That man that Count d'Array was in-

quiring for, Mr. Gerardus Bols, has presented five thousand pounds worth of those bills."

"Bols," James repeated. "Does he have the rest of the bills, Uncle?"

"He didn't say. He'll present them soon enough if he has any more. That's not important. What disturbs me is that Douglas has spent his reserve without a word to me."

"Is it a poor investment, sir?"

"It is a ruinous investment. Worse than that, it is a fraud upon Coult and Company. And if Douglas is found to be in possession of unlicensed munitions, his merchandise will be confiscated and he himself will be liable to a heavy fine. That is the least that would happen. He might even be charged with sedition, for the colonies have been in tumult and disorder in recent years and some bumptious jack-in-office might assume that mere possession of such merchandise established a prima-facie case of treason against Douglas. You can appreciate what that would mean to the House of Coult."

"Yes." James nodded. "Why did he do it?"

Sir Ruthven shrugged angrily. "Even now, thirty years after the '45, my brother is still a fire-eating Jacobite. Any opportunity of striking a blow at the English would engage his complete attention, probably his personal and financial support. More than one colonial merchant is looking to rebellion as a cure for his troubles. I expect Douglas may be among that group."

"Will the Americans push it to the point of revolt, Uncle?"

"Don't speculate, Jamie," Sir Ruthven said sharply. "The situation is highly dangerous. No one knows how the merchants may react, but if war comes to British America, the merchants will bring it. Most colonials are fundamentally loyal, but they live and die as the merchants say. I can't say what might be in Douglas' mind. I am not interested in knowing. I merely want to stop him. I leave it to you, Jamie. I cannot go to New York myself, and I dare not trust anyone else with a mission of such delicacy. I am not only thinking of our financial position, my boy, but also of our future as a family. I want no more Jacobite nonsense polluting our name. Already loyalty to the Stuarts has cost us our rightful home, and most of our family. Of six brothers, only Douglas and I still live. Did you know there had once been six of us, Jamie?"

"Yes, sir," James said softly. There was a harshness in his uncle's voice that was profoundly disturbing.

"Your father, James, was the best of the lot," Sir Ruthven went on in a savagely calm tone. "We were all together in

London, serving our apprenticeship under our father who had founded Coult and Company before we were born. As boys we had lived in Scotland, at Braeburn, but all of us, including Douglas, were rapidly becoming bankers—and Englishmen. James had all the banker's talent, but I was the best Englishman. At the time that seemed important, though now I can't imagine why we thought so."

Sir Ruthven bowed his head for a silent moment. "Then," he said very slowly, "then Prince Charles Edward Stuart planted his banner in Scotland, claiming the throne that had been stolen from his father. Bonnie Prince Charlie," Sir Ruthven said in bitterness. "That was 1745, a dark, bloody year. Our peaceful world exploded overnight. The clans rose to support the Prince. With Douglas it was all bagpipes and tartans and wild Highland battlecries. His frenzied enthusiasm reached such a peak that it even infected our father who was a staid and sober man. James was never enchanted by the Stuart magic, but after much deliberation he too went north with the others when Douglas beckoned. I alone remained behind and for the three years that my father lived after that day, he never spoke to me except in the way of business."

Sir Ruthven's harsh, bitter voice was stilled for a moment, as though his throat had closed suddenly. James could hardly bear to look at him.

"Three brothers," he went on, "Charles, Duncan, and Andrew, were killed in the first charge at Prestonpans. My father began to die then. Douglas and James were still with the Prince at Derby, the farthest point of their advance. But after they were defeated, the retreat was sounded, the clans ran back to Scotland, and James was left behind. He was thought to be dead, and he very nearly was. I managed to bribe his gaolers and fetch him away to Devonshire where he lived a shattered, feverish life for less than five years. There was a good year left to him, however, just one. During it he married your lovely mother and you were born. And then, with no warning at all, when we had all thought he was healed and well, he died. Of the six brothers, only Douglas and I remained. I, because I had refused to join the Prince in his romantic madness, and Douglas because he'd had the wit to run for his life after the last defeat at Culloden."

Sir Ruthven swallowed heavily and rubbed a hand hard across his eyes.

"For years I held a terrible bitterness in my heart toward Douglas. Now I no longer feel it as strongly, but after the '45, I blamed Douglas for everything that had happened

to us. I refused to help him when I might have. Douglas may feel he was badly used in those days. I dare say he would be justified in thinking so. I refused to let myself think of him as my brother. That's over now, I think. I could probably welcome him properly, though in truth I would prefer never to see him again."

His uncle's quiet voice held a thin, constrained vehemence that James had never heard from him before. There was in it such a wealth of sadness and remembered pain that James felt he was intruding upon a moment of private suffering.

"There is a wild strain in all the Coult's," Sir Ruthven said after a brooding moment. "More than once it has brought us to the very brink of ruin. That was why I had you educated amongst the slow-minded Southrons of Sussex where you would never hear of the foolish Stuart-worship that even now bars most Scots from sanity. Your mother was opposed to my plan, but when she died a few years after your father, there was no one to oppose me. On the whole I think it was successful. You aren't secretly a Jacobite, are you, Jamie?"

"No, sir," James said firmly, "but I'm not much of an Englishman, either."

"Of course you aren't," Sir Ruthven agreed with a strange insistence. "I'd pitch you out of my house if I thought you were. Learn to live with them, Jamie, and learn to take your profit from them. But stay clear of their damned stupid wars and their asinine politics. I accepted knighthood only to quiet rumors that I was secretly in league with the Jacobites. But three times since I have refused the peerage I have been offered for saving some royal nincompoop's financial neck. I will refuse any that may come in the future, for I will swear to no allegiance I do not feel. In a few years I will arrange for you to be knighted, Jamie, for a title is useful in London. But never let yourself be identified with any faction, my boy. Allow them all equal financing, give them all your profound blessings, and let them destroy each other freely."

Sir Ruthven gulped thirstily from his glass and put it down on the bare table with a sharp tap. He glared at it angrily.

"Douglas was never my favorite brother, Jamie," he went on, forcing himself to speak more calmly. "But it will do you good to meet him. And I should imagine that Miss Luisa will now be a beauty worth a far longer journey, if she has any of her mother's brilliance. Yes, it is time you met Douglas, I think. You never had a chance to know your father and what you see in me must at times bewilder a young man. Douglas is more open, friendly on first meeting, sincerely

amiable. He is also stupid, but that should be no bar to a pleasant relationship."

"No, sir," James said uncertainly. "What inducement am I to offer for his share of the business?"

Sir Ruthven half smiled without looking up. "Have I sounded so vindictive, boy? Do you suspect that I won't deal fairly with Douglas? Perhaps I deserve that. The memory of old angers grows very bitter at times, and turns inward. Then I wish I might have that boyhood decision to make again. It might have been better if I had gone north with my brothers to join the Prince. But no matter how I may sound to you, boy, I don't hate Douglas. I wish to deal generously with him. I can't say what his business is worth. You will determine that and make a fair offer. You may cancel his debt to me, and add any amount up to fifty thousand pounds for his good will, with the express understanding that he is to retire permanently from all mercantile enterprise. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir. I think so."

"Of course it isn't clear. It's too much to absorb all at once, I know. But I do not anticipate any serious objection from Douglas. He has not seen much profit recently and a need for ready money may have pushed him into his present position. Whatever plans he has in mind will have to be abandoned. You will tell him I am completely opposed. If necessary, I will inform the authorities of his actions, for I will allow no one, not even Douglas, to endanger the House of Coult. Quite obviously, he will then be in even greater need of money and a generous settlement should be most appealing to him. He has a position to maintain in New York and by now Miss Luisa will be launched in society and will ultimately require a dowry fitting Douglas' estate. No, I expect no great difficulty. We'll have another talk tomorrow and I'll prepare an *aide-mémoire* for you to take along. Six weeks on board ship should give you ample time for study."

"I should think so, Uncle."

The barely disguised note of eagerness in his voice made Sir Ruthven smile in response.

"An exciting prospect, eh, Jamie? I rather envy you. Well, get along now. Give some thought to what you'll want to take with you. Provincial merchants carry themselves in lordly style, so be sure you do us all honor. Take your man Crutchfield with you; good servants are rare in the colonies. I'll send Phillips over to your apartment in the morning to pack your baggage. Don't forget writing paper and quills, some books to read on the ship, and plenty of food and wine.

But Phillips will know all about that. You may leave it to him."

"I will, Uncle. Thank you." James rose and stood behind his chair. His uncle sat heavily, arms stretched on the table, head low. From that angle, candlelight made a dazzle of the massive shoulders of his shot-silk coat. His hands were huge in the dimness. He was a strong man, James realized suddenly, a man bred for warfare, one would have thought from the sight of him. And in a very real sense, his life had been a constant war. "Thank you for your trust in me," James said softly.

His uncle did not stir even to look up as James went out, signalling to the butler for his hat and cloak.

It was chill waiting in the gloomy street. The tall lamp at the corner had a pane missing and the light had blown out, leaving a long stretch in darkness. The hard wind knifed through James' cloak, tensing his shoulders, seemingly colder because of the darkness. James sneezed suddenly and explosively. He pulled his handkerchief from his sleeve pocket.

He stamped impatiently back and forth, shivering from cold, beating his arms against his chest, silently cursing the laggard Crutchfield. He was usually dependable, but the truth was that for a manservant, Crutchfield was far too moody and impudent, given to strange dilatory streaks when his long Scottish lip would shove out stubbornly and everything he did at such times went subtly wrong. He was passable as a valet and he had a nice touch with a smoothing iron. He was splendid with horses and for that excellence James was willing to forgive much. More than one informal race had been won by Crutchfield's clever whip.

And I wish he would show some of that cleverness now, James thought impatiently. The rascal is probably asleep somewhere.

He retreated up the short flight of stairs toward his uncle's door, half inclined to wait inside out of the raw damp wind. A curtained hansom coach rolled out of the shadows with a rapid clatter, striking sparks from the flint cobbles when the driver kicked his brake down hard. A white pudgy hand reached out the side window and turned the doorlatch. Without waiting for the driver to put down the step, the passenger struggled out to the sidewalk and lunged quickly toward Sir Ruthven's door, staring up gape-mouthed at James' indistinct figure.

"Sir Ruthven! Not going out, are you? I thought you were going to wait until I—"

The short round man was almost bulbous in his tight, fur-lined cloak. An oddly patterned round fur hat sat squarely

on top of his moonlike face. His small button mouth dropped in momentary surprise. Then the man scowled and his fat cherub's face reminded James of a baby on the verge of outraged complaint.

"Who are you, sir?" the man demanded in a shrill tone. "I have not before—"

Behind James, the door to his uncle's house opened quickly. There Sir Ruthven stood alone, unsteady in the entrance.

"Inside, both of you," he snapped. "Quickly. Yes, you too, Jamie."

The round man followed James warily into the hallway, his hands now out of sight under his thick cloak. In his scowling, suspicious face his eyes were almost hidden. James stepped away from him and glanced questioningly at his uncle.

"My nephew, James Coult," Sir Ruthven said briskly. "An old, valued client, Jamie. Now, don't let me detain you any—"

"Nephew!" The round man moved forward eagerly, the rosy flesh of his face wreathed in a wide smile. "So! It is no wonder I thought him to be you. I am Gerardus Bols, young sir. Always at your service."

"Honored, Mr. Bols," James said absently. He looked at his uncle for guidance.

"You are rash, Mr. Bols," Sir Ruthven said testily. "There was no need for my nephew to know your name. Now you have heard it, Jamie, you will be good enough to forget it immediately."

"Certainly, Uncle," James said. "I hear my chaise outside, so I'll say good night again. Honored, Mr. Bols."

Sir Ruthven nodded in farewell, but never once did his hard, fixed gaze leave Bols' face. Even before James had completely closed the door behind him, Sir Ruthven's voice sounded clearly, harsh with anger. Mr. Bols' indiscretion was being defined beyond any possibility of error, James assumed. He half smiled in the darkness. Mr. Gerardus Bols not only had Count d'Array to contend with, but also Sir Ruthven Coult. The Dutch smuggler probably was the old and valued client his uncle termed him; more than one international smuggler used Coult and Company for his complicated payments and receipts, but Sir Ruthven would not care to have that fact known, even by his nephew. James dismissed Mr. Bols from his mind as he crossed to his waiting chaise. He climbed in and waved Crutchfield to drive on.

"Home?" Crutchfield inquired.

"Straight home, Crutchfield," James said. "We have a busy

night ahead of us. You'll have to get out all my travelling boxes and portmanteaux and see what more we'll need for an extended journey."

"We?" Crutchfield leaned far down from his precarious perch on the box behind the chaise. "Did you say 'we?'" His tone carried that submerged excitement that James had displayed at his uncle's table.

"Yes, you'll be coming too, Crutchfield. To New York Province in the American colonies."

Crutchfield gave a low, strangled cry. For once his native garrulity totally failed him. He could not even find an apt Biblical tag to express his feelings, and for Crutchfield that was almost unprecedented. He straightened to his seat and drove silently for the rest of the trip through the Hyde Park to the Argyle Buildings where James maintained a suite of rooms. He pulled up at the curb with his usual flourish and leaped down to help James.

"Don't put the mare away, Crutchfield," James said. "I want you to drive her around to Lord Milldown's house on St. James's Street and turn her over to his head groom. Ask him to stable the chaise for me until I return. Here is some money. Take a hansom and come back promptly."

Crutchfield nodded with a wise, impudent grin. "Finally decided to let him have her, did you? How high did his lordship come in the end?"

James stared at him absently. Apparently none of his plans were ever proof against Crutchfield's curiosity. Probably that was largely his fault, for James had years ago realized that he could not long maintain an impersonal relationship with anyone. Since, even with a servant, he would establish an intimacy soon or late, it was best to choose that servant carefully. A well-trained English valet would have regarded any deviation from impersonality as an affront. Crutchfield could no more be impersonal than he could be English.

James turned back from the door and half shrugged. "I got him up to three hundred guineas this afternoon. Not bad for the old girl, eh?"

"Well, she's a pretty creature still," Crutchfield said with a judicious waggle of his head. "Speedy and flashy even if she is a bit long in the tooth. His lordship will never know the difference the way his man drives. And it should be worth that much for him to be able to say he's got Jamie Coult's pretty dancer. Riches certainly make themselves wings, as the prophets tell us. His lordship will think he's flying. But that is a sight of money for a mare we got for a hundred pounds."

"It is indeed, Crutchfield. A share of the profit is yours, of course. And when we return I'll look to you to find me an adequate replacement."

"Thank ye, sir, thank ye kindly. 'Twon't be hard to find another dancing lady around here. I know every horse in London, and most of them that's due to foal right now."

"I am in your hands, Crutchfield. Get along now and come back as promptly as you can."

Crutchfield went up into his high seat like a monkey. He flourished his whip, shrieking wildly as the long-legged mare surged into her collar and clattered down the road in a swift, controlled burst of speed. A last farewell dash for Crutchfield, James thought. A mortal pity there was no one around to give him a race.

He went inside slowly and left the door unlatched behind him. A folded and sealed square of paper slid across the carpet when his shoe touched it. James dropped his hat and cloak on a hallway chair, slid his swordstick into a tub, and bent to pick up the letter. He carried it into the warm, shadowed drawing room and turned up the lamps. He sneezed explosively twice before he could get his handkerchief to his nose. He fought down another spasm, holding his breath until the seizure had passed. Then he settled into a deep chair, close to the fireplace and huddled to the blaze until he felt warm again. He reached for the letter, laid it across the arm of his chair and broke the seals.

The paper carried a thickly embossed coronet at the top. The spidery writing said, "I would be honored to have you join a small party at White's Club tonight. Most of my guests will be known to you and the prospects are most pleasant. Your new friend, Henri d'Array."

James sneezed again and put the letter aside. In the casual, informal world of the London bachelor, there was nothing remarkable in Count d'Array quickly improving upon a new acquaintanceship, and normally such an invitation would have found James in a receptive mood. The air of submerged menace that seemed a part of the cold-eyed, arrogant d'Array was not disturbing or repellent to James, though he suspected that Uncle Ruthven's warning was probably well based.

It was quite likely, James thought suddenly, that d'Array had heard that Mr. Gerardus Bols was still in London. Possibly he hoped to wheedle information from James. He snorted thickly and applied his handkerchief to his nose again. Let the persistent Frenchman apply again to Uncle Ruthven. James had quite enough to worry about without adding Bols or d'Array to his list.

◀ CHAPTER 3 ▶

THE FAST mail packet *Earl of Halifax* needed only five weeks for its rough winter passage westward to New York. Uncle Ruthven had anticipated at least six weeks, James remembered, and he was eternally grateful that the voyage had been shorter. For all of that time he had been miserably sick, wobbly-legged and dull-eyed, as the ship plunged through iron-grey seas, bucking and surging under the impact of gales howling down from the north.

Not all of his trip had been uncomfortable, however. The journey by road to Falmouth in Uncle Ruthven's big German coach had even been mildly pleasant. Heavily laden, the coach had still room enough to allow James to stretch out full length while Crutchfield's cunning whip kept the heavy double-team at a spanking gait along the rutted roads. A magnificent contrivance, that carriage, James thought, probably once the property of a general, for only the military men have mastered the art of making themselves comfortable in trying circumstances. But even the most experienced soldier would have been just as miserable as James, once on board the *Halifax*.

He had come up the gangway weak and trembling, racked alternately with chills and fever. That winter half of London was a-bed with shivering ague, but James took little pleasure in knowing of his companions in misery. It seemed that malevolent fates had selected him as their especial victim. James had grudgingly accepted Crutchfield's support as he came aboard, fumbling his way with awkward strides, cursing drearily, monotonously, under his breath. Three hours afterward the *Earl of Halifax* had set sail, nosing out into heavy seas. The swift and painful spasms of seasickness that immediately set upon James seemed the last, unendurable straw. For two weeks he had scarcely been able to lift his head from his pillow.

James and Crutchfield and a mountain of baggage were berthed in two passenger cabins and at most seasons of the year the voyage might have been stimulating and highly agreeable. That it was endurable was due entirely to Uncle Ruthven's forethought and generosity in providing James

with a great supply of delicacies that alone sustained him for the trip. Tongues and hams and cheeses, mild but flavorful soup in bottles, bland ship's biscuits, barrels of apples and onions, a case of golden raisins and a double crate of wines were enough to see him through and leave enough extra so that he might offer an occasional dinner to his fellow passengers. As yet James had not felt up to such an effort. In fact, he was compelled to admit that most of that excellent food had been totally wasted on the choppy sea. The last week of the passage had brought them to calmer waters with milder weather and on one recent day James had actually managed to eat two reasonable meals and retain every bite. His recovery was swift after that, but he had not yet felt sufficiently energetic to leave the canvas windshelter that Crutchfield had rigged for him just outside his cabin door. There, in the ship's lee, a thin watery sun cast a faint warmth and the hard winds were gentled to a breeze.

James huddled in a fur-lined greatcoat that Uncle Ruthven had included in his baggage. He studied over and over the complicated *aide-mémoire* his uncle had prepared, and he carefully digested the documents that accompanied it. One paragraph particularly disturbed him.

I enclose two letters, each addressed to your uncle Douglas, Sir Ruthven had written. In the first I have presented affectionate and brotherly greetings and explained rather generally why I have sent you to New York. This letter, together with the offer you are empowered to make will, I pray, be adequate to the task. If not, you will use your own judgment about delivering the second letter. In it I have specifically listed the painful and damaging reasons that compel me to eliminate Douglas from any connection with Coult and Company. It will please me greatly if you are able to accomplish your mission without using that second letter.

In the cheerfully relaxed atmosphere of his uncle's dining room, his mission had not seemed so very difficult, but now, five weeks later with the *Halifax* already pitching to on-shore rollers, James could not imagine how he could have been so foolishly sanguine. Any of a thousand things could go wrong. If Uncle Douglas flatly refused to sell, James had no effective lever with which to budge him, except the threat to sue for repayment of his debt to Uncle Ruthven. Even James did not think that was meant seriously. Uncle Ruthven's confidence and generosity seemed limitless, but the limit would probably be discovered soon enough if James were to return a failure.

James tried to dismiss the gloomy misgivings that plagued him constantly. He was still dispirited and unsteady from a long bout of seasickness. Naturally his normal buoyancy was greatly lowered; that was only to be expected. A few more days of rest and he should be in good spirits again, ready for Uncle Douglas and whatever awaited him in New York.

He put aside the *aide-mémoire* and bent to open the crate of books and papers Uncle Ruthven had sent. He fingered through it to find something he had not read. He brushed aside familiar issues of the *Gentleman's Magazine* and the *London Magazine*. Both had lengthy, bombastic, ill-informed articles denouncing rebellious colonials, but no useful information. In them James had read for the first time of the Committee of Correspondence the several colonies had established as a necessary first step toward unified action. There was the germination of the Continental Congress, James thought, and a good thing too. But to James the most interesting and useful items in the box were the flimsily bound collections of speeches and reports made by the pro-colonial faction in Commons that Sir Ruthven had gathered for him. Most young men of fashion in London knew little of the long, fevered disputes with the colonies, and cared less. James was no exception, but now that he was presented with a colonial problem of his own, he found himself reading Pitt, Barré, Burke, Fox and Wilkes with an absorption that would have been impossible a few months earlier.

It was difficult to sum up the problem, James realized. The language used in debate was often noble, and serenely detached, but the disillusioning fact seemed to be that the Americans insisted upon being exempt from all taxes except those they themselves levied. And whatever taxes they raised they wanted to keep for their own use. To hell with England and the British Empire, in effect.

Probably the colonial case was most eloquently put by Edmund Burke, James considered judiciously. And why shouldn't that debate engage Burke's sympathetic attention? He was turning a pretty penny as agent for the Province of New York. The least his employers would demand was a good speech now and again. It was interesting to note that the lofty reforms Burke insisted upon for his American clients were the very reforms Burke most fervently objected to for England herself.

But underneath the selfishness, beneath the greed and the ingratitude, lay a deeper question that was beginning to

disturb James as it had long disturbed Parliament and the colonies. Every solution that had ever been offered was entirely dependent upon coercion. None of the King's ministers had thought seriously of trying conciliation. Possibly there was no chance of finding a peaceful solution within the British family, but it was equally clear that no one—not even the colonists—had tried very hard to find it. Lord North might dispatch another six thousand troops to British America, but that would not make the colonists love the King, any more than military occupation of Scotland had created loyalty amongst the clansmen. The hornet's nest was strident with fury and James was beginning to understand where the anger had been born.

But none of that was his problem, except indirectly. The mercantile profits of Coult and Company would dwindle in the American market, but those losses would be happily offset by profits in other areas. Except for the fact that Uncle Douglas was resident in New York, James felt no personal involvement with the colonies. His only concern was to conclude his delicate commission, to create, in short, a peaceful and generous solution within his own family. He felt that he could safely leave other problems to people with a taste for that sort of thing.

He turned over a worn copy of *Administration of the Colonies* by Thomas Pownall who had once been Governor of New York and of Massachusetts; a worthy, weighty tome and one which James suspected he was fated never to finish. Much the same might be said for *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, written by a colonial advocate named Thomas Jefferson.

Finally James selected an uncut copy of *Tom Jones* from the book box and slumped down comfortably with it. He glanced up casually when a shadow fell across the page, and frowned at Crutchfield's thin wind-burned face peering at him over the canvas shelter.

"What is it, man?" Crutchfield's unfailing good health and high spirits were very trying for James and he found it increasingly difficult to mask his irritation.

"Sorry to intrude, sir," Crutchfield mumbled. "Capting sends his . . . his most distinguished compliments and begs . . . begs to say that—"

"Get on with it, man."

"Landfall in an hour or so, is what it adds up to," Crutchfield said with a rush. "Capting says you'll get a fine view from the starboard quarter." He eyed James thoughtfully and added, "That's the other side of the ship."

"I know, Crutchfield. But thank you nonetheless. Will we make port today?"

"Aye. But it won't do us much good, from what I hear. This here's a crowded harbor. No room in the inn. Ain't near enough docks or quays for all the ships, and these colonials don't know about lightering. Captin' says we might have to wait as much as a week before we can find a dock."

"Nonsense!" James snapped. "The Captain may wait if he is fool enough, but I certainly won't. I want you to hail a shoreboat as soon as you can. Go into the city and find lodgings for us at the best tavern you can find. The Captain may be able to recommend a few places. Then come out to the ship again in the morning with men enough to take off my baggage."

Crutchfield bobbed his head. He cocked an impudent eyebrow, and waited.

"My purse is inside. Take two guineas, and pack a small bag for yourself. Be ready to leave when the first boat comes out to us. Probably there will be plenty of them. If not, hail the master of the pilot-boat and arrange to sail in with him."

"You'll not be wanting to stay with Mr. Douglas Coult, then?" Crutchfield poked his tongue into the pouch of his cheek and tilted his head at James with all the cocky assurance of a London-bred sparrow. For weeks he had been trying with off-handed slyness to surprise from James a hint of his mission.

James held his face straight, wanting to grin at the transparent device. He shook his head with sober deliberation. He had good reason to maintain secrecy, even if his training with Uncle Ruthven had not shown him the wisdom of keeping his own counsel. In his mind he could almost hear Uncle Ruthven's spuriously languid voice repeating the words written in his *aide-mémoire*. "Be careful not to associate yourself too quickly or too closely with your Uncle Douglas. All colonial merchants operate dangerously on credit, due to a critical and constant shortage of cash. Hence a colonial merchant's integrity must never be questioned, or he is ruined. It is not unlikely, for reasons I have explained, that your Uncle Douglas' integrity may be considered dubious in mercantile circles. The House of Coult may wish to function in New York after Douglas has left us. See to it that our family is not involved seriously with Douglas' problems."

James waved Crutchfield on his way. "Mr. Coult is not ex-

pecting me," he said easily. "Do as I say, Crutchfield. Come for me early in the morning. Find out from the Captain where he plans to anchor if he cannot dock today. Now, you'd best start packing our baggage."

"Aye," Crutchfield muttered sourly. "I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh." He stamped across the deck and the door of his cabin slammed hard behind him.

James read on, quietly, absently, never quite caught by the tosspot maunderings of Squire Western, listening with half his mind to the mate's bellowed commands that sent the hands racing up the rigging like a pack of East Indian monkeys. When the mate shouted, "Mizzen braces! Back the mizzen tops'!" James marked his place with a finger and closed his book. *Halifax* came neatly into the wind and hove-to.

"Picking up the pilot," James muttered. "Must be an elderly fellow if he can't come aboard on the run."

After a hesitant moment, *Halifax* heeled with the wind again, driving handily on the starboard tack. Nothing wrong with the pilot's nerve, James thought. He was bringing the ship to harbor with a dangerous amount of sail on her.

James put his book down and went into his cabin, moving straight through to the starboard door and out again. At first he could see only an indistinct blur of land off the bow, and the tiny triangular sail of the pilot-boat dancing alongside, a cable's length away. Then, as *Halifax* beat up-channel, a sloping headland receded and James could make out the low grey bulk of a stone fort in the distance, and a dot of vivid scarlet flapping at the top of an invisible flagpole. Nothing much to look at, James thought. Certainly New York was no more interesting than Falmouth at this remove. The whole island seemed to be tilted eastward like a listing ship and the mere sight of it made James swallow heavily. He had suffered quite enough from listing ships.

Heavy sluggish clouds rolled in from the west and gradually the scarlet dot vanished in the gloom. Soon the fort itself was hidden in mist. James glanced around the ship before going inside. A chattering collection of passengers had gathered at the forward rail and for a brief moment James was tempted to join them. It might be awkward though, he realized. He had not yet been introduced to any of them, hadn't even seen them, in fact. And too, he wasn't feeling enormously well at the moment. The heavy ground-swell was regular, smooth and even, but nonetheless James could taste a harsh bitterness at the back of his throat with each motion of *Halifax*. Best not to take chances at this stage. And very likely all his fellow passengers had already con-

demned him for a churlish misanthrope. Probably it was far too late to change that opinion. And little point in trying, as a matter of fact, for it was most unlikely that he would ever see any of them again during his brief stay in New York.

◀ CHAPTER 4 ▶

BY MID-MORNING the pale sun was giving off a faint warmth. A brisk on-shore breeze whipped the fog to thin shreds and James could see one of his boxes swinging tautly from a whip to the main yardarm. Crutchfield shouted shrilly from the lighter alongside, and slowly the last of his baggage was lowered over the side. James doffed his hat and approached the Captain with his farewell respects. After two minutes for the necessary amenities, he was clambering cautiously down a rope ladder to the waiting boat.

Halifax towered above him, rolling lightly at anchor, seeming ready to topple over on the small boat. The railings were lined with patient passengers willing to wait until *Halifax* was brought to dock later in the day. James looked up and waved. A few handkerchiefs fluttered in reply but most of them ignored the passenger who had kept to his solitary cabin for the entire passage. A slim, lithe figure in a bright, sky-blue coat lifted a gold-laced hat as James turned away to his seat. A familiar gesture, James thought absently, and a vaguely familiar man.

"Give way!" Crutchfield bawled hoarsely. He stroked his throat and swallowed painfully. Three busy hours of shrill exhortation had left him almost speechless. But he had managed well, James thought. The four oarsmen had handled the baggage skillfully and now were pulling with a good cheer for the distant shore. But lacking Crutchfield's goading supervision, it would have been closer to midday than ten o'clock when they left the *Halifax*.

The uneven skyline of New York emerged from behind a wooded headland as the boat struggled through the swift channel of the Narrows and entered the lower harbor. The low grey fort was dominant now and the rows of cannon in the battery below seemed pointed directly at the small boat. Beyond, but still indistinct with fog, James could make out

only a few towering church spires. Seen from the river, New York seemed wholly a seaport with hundreds of warehouses, distilleries and sugar houses edging the waterfront. A dense multitude of shipping swung at anchor. Every dock and quay in the city was forested with the bare masts of ships discharging or taking on cargo. Even the Great Pool of London seldom displayed a more thriving commerce.

But this was the bad period for American trade, James remembered, thinking of Parliament's many restrictive acts. It was surprising to see so much ordered commotion in a port where few merchants could boast of a profitable balance. As his boat edged closer, James eyed the docked ships more closely. Naval vessels largely, he noted. Not much profit there, except to contractors and quartermasters. His boat rounded the stern of a loaded trawler that stank luridly of aged fish.

"Whitehall Slip, they call this," Crutchfield said in a hoarse mumble. "Not much like London, eh?"

He took James' locked travelling desk under one elbow and leaped to the stone landing. He reached down with a steady hand.

"The wain is for the baggage," he said briskly. "I undertook to engage the chaise yonder, pending your approval." Crutchfield gestured with evident self-approval, but his eyes were worried as he watched James inspecting the chaise.

"Excellent, Crutchfield," James said. He walked around the glossy carriage on legs that wobbled unsteadily. A few more strides and he seemed to take a protean strength from the solidity of the earth. He stroked an admiring hand along the shoulder of the bay gelding harnessed to the chaise.

"Gentleman wanted ten guineas the month, but he agreed to take two guineas the week, after we talked a bit." Crutchfield fingered his throat gingerly. "Seemed like to me, you wouldn't want to be hiring carriages all the time."

"Quite right," James agreed. He watched the boatmen heaving his heavy baggage into the wain. Crutchfield bawled an obscene warning and they shifted the rest of the boxes more carefully.

James steadied himself against the chaise door as Crutchfield reached past him to pull down the step. As he straightened, a strong light touched his cheek. Outlined against his face, in a harsh streak from eye to jaw, was a savage red weal, fresh from the look of it.

"Where the devil did you get that?" he asked abruptly. "Brawling again, I suppose?"

Crutchfield eyed him with quiet scorn. "Having a peace-

ful glass, troubling nobody," he said in a low angry mutter. "British officer stumbles on my boot. 'Out of my way, you rebel dog,' he growls in a pretty little voice. One gentlemanly comment leads to another and he comes at me, savaging with his little whip. I didn't expect he'd be quite so quick."

"Who was he?" James demanded. "I'll teach that jumped-up young jackanapes to—"

"No need," Crutchfield said, shrugging it away. "Pretty young officer boy, he was. Fell down going home, somebody said. Fell on his whip, I hear. Might even have a mark on his pretty face, maybe."

James shook his head. "You're a sorry rogue, Crutchfield. I'll find you hanging at Tyburn one day, I suspect."

"I've been spared for bigger things," Crutchfield said with a quick, darting smile. "The Lord protects his own. Now sir, if you would be pleased to mount to your seat, we'll be on our way as soon as—"

"But will you be able to find your way, Crutchfield? It's a strange city after all. Wouldn't it be best to—"

Crutchfield waggled a folded paper and grinned, a snaggle-toothed grimace of impudent confidence. "Not a bit of it. I bought me a map yesterday. Two shillings, it was, and a pure robbery, too. The whole city's only a mile long, and then there's some villages up north. Nothing to it. I could have found my way around inside two hours. Without no map, either."

"Excellent, Crutchfield," James said warmly. "Excellent. I am very pleased. You seem to have thought of everything. What of our lodgings?"

Crutchfield flicked a wary, measuring glance at James, started to speak, then excused himself to pay off the boatmen who had finished loading the wain. He dribbled coins into the waiting palms and gestured for the wagon driver to take his seat. He returned to James and opened the chaise door.

"Taverns here ain't like in London," he said in a hoarse undertone. "I found that out soon enough. Here it's all politics, along with the drinking and wenching. If you're a real, flaming Tory, you go to this here tavern and that coffee house, but if you're a Whig, you go to others. And if you're a merchant, you go here, but if you're a mechanic, you go there. Monstrous confusing, sir, to tell the truth, and I didn't rightly get it straight. But the Capting of the *Halifax* said the Queen's Head was a likely place, and from what I was told last night, it's the place where all the rich merchants feel free to go. Right near the Royal Exchange, so I thought you'd maybe—"

"Excellent, Crutchfield," James said again. "Let's see what the Queen's Head has to offer. Are you sure you know the way?"

Crutchfield swung the step up and closed the door behind James. He flapped his map again before climbing to his seat. "I could show you?" he said invitingly.

"I'll look at it later," James said. "Drive slowly and let me have a look at the city."

Crutchfield clucked and shook out his whiplash. The light, well-sprung chaise rolled sweetly over the cobbles. The gelding's muscles bunched with strain as he lunged up the easy slope. "Fort George to the left, sir," Crutchfield called. He swung the horse right at the next corner, giving James only a fleeting glimpse of the stone walls, the sentry-guarded gate.

One long block lined with bare, soot-blackened trees in front of brick houses and shopfronts, and then Crutchfield swept left again on a wide attractive street and pulled his eager horse to a stop before a three-storied brick building with a long wooden piazza running the full length. A swinging sign at the corner read, "The Queen's Head," and under the lettering was a crude, garishly tinted portrait of Queen Charlotte, never considered one of England's beautiful queens, though she had never looked quite that repulsive. Crutchfield jumped down and handed his reins to the waiting groom, a tiny, crop-haired Negro boy, quick and cheerful in shirtsleeves and bare feet despite the brisk weather.

"Not much of a tour, sir," Crutchfield said. "Would you like to take a gallop around town before—"

"We'll have plenty of time for that later," James said, eager to set about his business. "I'd welcome a look at our new quarters and then I want to stop in at Coult and Company."

Crutchfield led the way into a sunny foyer. He glanced briefly into the deserted common room of the tavern, then shrugged at James. "No need to search out the landlord. I know the way."

The narrow, turning staircase was cramped for a man of James' height, but beautifully fashioned in the mode of an earlier day. There was an air of warm, spacious solidity to the tavern that pleased James. For all of Uncle Ruthven's explanations, James had, in some secret part of his mind, been anticipating barren cheer in New York. But the sight of the Queen's Head was immensely soothing, and the faint odors of beeswax from the oak paneling, of rum and negus from the taproom, of roasting meats and baking bread from the kitchen, lifted his spirits and brought him to his door in a state of pleasurable expectation.

His room was small and chill, but bright with the morning sun. A lavish unlit fire on the hearth promised a snug warmth. The furniture was adequate, though the bed was a trifle small. Nothing here reminded him of his chambers at the Argyle, but it would serve. James nodded his approval.

"Pleasant enough, Crutchfield. Have you found a place for yourself?"

"Next flight up," Crutchfield said with a blissful smile. "Right next to where the chambermaid sleeps."

James turned away to hide an answering smile. With the fatalistic acceptance common to most transplanted Scots, Crutchfield could adapt himself readily to any change. Another few days and he would know New York as well as he knew London and Edinburgh. Already his voice had altered subtly. This was an ability that had always fascinated James. Crutchfield was an inspired mimic, possibly in response to the urgent pressures common to all hunted things. In London he had been able to assume perfectly the intonation, the inherited rhythm of the Cockney born within hearing of Bow Bells. Whatever the distinctive sound of New York's citizen, Crutchfield would have acquired it within a matter of days, probably with the eager assistance of the chambermaid.

"Don't trouble lighting the fire, Crutchfield," he said briskly. "I am going to call on Mr. Douglas Coult straightaway. I suppose you are prepared for my next question?"

Crutchfield snorted. "Aye. I inquired about it first off. Seek and ye shall find. Coult and Company has a counting-house on lower Broad Street just across from the Royal Exchange. I could show you where—"

"I'll manage. You'd best see to our baggage. I would rather relish a walk on solid ground. Which is Broad Street?"

Crutchfield jerked a grimy thumb over his shoulder. "Just outside. Turn left from the door and then cross the street. It's but a few steps down toward the water from there."

"Very good. Speak to the landlord and see that he gives us something tolerable for dinner. I am going to be hungry by midday."

James opened a cupboard door and placed his locked travelling desk on the floor inside. He glanced briefly at his wavery reflection in the polished metal strip pinned above the washstand and paused to settle his cravat more evenly. Crutchfield bowed him through the door.

Broad Street was wide, cobbled, and busy. Crossing it might actually be hazardous at times, for the wagons and carriages dashed to and from the Exchange and the nearby docks with brutal disregard for people on foot. James moved

nimbly over the rough paving and turned toward the harbor, leaning into the hard wind.

Coult and Company in New York occupied a small, two-storied brick building with a gambrel roof and decorative cornices. James paused to inspect the brass tablet mounted in the center of the door. Considering the fact that its design must have been sketched from a boyhood memory, the tablet was a faithful reproduction of the one used by Coult and Company in London. The sight of it touched James unexpectedly and he went inside with a faint, expectant smile, more eager now to meet his Uncle Douglas.

No porter guarded the entrance here. James entered a small bare foyer. A closed door on the right probably led to a corridor that gave onto Uncle Douglas' private room. An open door facing him showed a bleak, cheerless, dusty counting-room, a vast chamber that occupied most of the ground floor with high sloping desks for eight junior clerks lining the walls. Only one was occupied by a hunch-shouldered boy in a ragged greatcoat. Overseeing the room was the chief clerk's desk centered beyond the door. In spite of a round-bellied stove that seeped acrid smoke, the counting-room was only slightly warmer than the street.

The chief clerk slid down from his high stool and approached James, rubbing thin dry hands over and over, making a crisp, slithery sound like crumpling paper. His long dour face, his black funereal garments and his glum depression reminded James strongly of Mr. McLaglen, his Uncle Ruthven's chief clerk. It was quite possible that only people like that ever managed to become chief clerks—or wanted to.

"May I assist you, sir?" the clerk asked in a dubious tone.

"I am calling to see Mr. Douglas Coult," James said. "Will you announce me, please? I am Mr. James Coult."

The clerk snuffled noisily and wiped his nose with a rumpled, ink-stained handkerchief. A fat, transparent bead immediately rolled from one nostril and hung dangling. The clerk snuffled twice before it retreated again.

"Mr. Coult is—ah—not available to callers, sir," he said. "An appointment may possibly be arranged, though I doubt if—"

"Nonsense," James said sharply. "Tell him that Mr. James Coult of London wishes to see him at once. Get a move on, man."

"But—but, Mr. Coult," the clerk stammered. "Mr. Coult isn't—I mean, Mr. Coult doesn't—"

"Stop maundering, man. Get along and—"

"What is this infernal row, Billings?" A harsh, quick voice called from the hallway behind James.

"Oh, Captain Sephard," the clerk said with evident relief. He snuffled noisily and mopped at his nose with his fingers. "This gentleman wishes to see Mr. Coult. I was trying to tell him that—"

"Quite right. No callers."

James swung to look at the broad, stocky man who stood balancing arrogantly, springing lightly up and down as if unable to subdue an excessive energy. Every part of him seemed to exude that energy, the thick, grey-streaked black hair barely restrained in a tight club, the lively dark eyes that measured James in a challenging fashion that was close to insult, the constant, restless motion of his thickly muscled body.

"And who are you, sir?" James demanded in a tone that sounded more truculent than he had intended. Something about this man would always compel a strong response.

"This is Captain Isaac Sephard, Mr. Coult's partner, sir," the clerk said nervously. "And this gentleman is—"

"I have no interest in this gentleman," Captain Sephard said in sharp dismissal. "I shall be in for the next hour, Billings. Bring me the Madeira ledger and all the—"

"But, sir! Captain Sephard!" the clerk wailed. He snuffled again and held out both hands plaintively. "This gentleman is Mr. James Coult! From London!"

Captain Sephard swung back from the door with a sudden swirl of motion. "From London? From Coult and Company?"

He stared at James with an almost savage intensity, then with an abrupt decisiveness that James suspected was habitual with him, he bowed swiftly and smiled, holding out a hard, weathered hand.

"Please forgive me, sir. I should have recognized you at once. Will you come to my room?"

James ignored the offered hand. He bowed stiffly and waited for the Captain to lead the way along the unlighted corridor to a warm, elegant room at the back of the building.

Captain Sephard bustled about, setting out glasses and decanters, a rack of pipes, an unopened box of tobacco. James inspected the room carefully, remembering that Uncle Ruthven always maintained that more might be discerned from a man's mode of living than from his speech or actions.

The room was almost magnificent. There was an Oriental lushness that did not appeal to James, though it was probably excellent in its way. The floor was totally covered with a collection of rugs every bit as fine as the one in Uncle Ruthven's office. The writing table and its accompanying chair were gold-edged ebony and the tile-bordered fireplace had clearly been designed to match. The glasses Captain

Sephard was setting out were gold-veined Venetian and far too valuable for casual use. The three windows of the room looked out toward the busy harbor, but they were so heavily curtained with a pale gauzy silk that one might imagine himself anywhere. Of all the decorations, only one seemed to have direct reference to the interests of Coult and Company. That was a painting of a storm-heeled ship hung prominently behind the writing table, its rough mahogany frame clashing with the polished gold-and-ebony of the room. The legend read, "Letter-of-Marque Sloop *Unicorn* which took the *San Jose* on November 19, 1759, with a cargo of 372,000 Spanish milled dollars. I. Sephard, Master."

"The foundation of Mr. Coult's fortune," Captain Sephard said quickly, noticing James' interest. "Magnificent days for American merchants, sir. We have come a sad distance since then."

The line between privateering and outright piracy had always seemed vague to James, but he gave no sign of his misgivings. He took the glass Captain Sephard pressed upon him and sat in the chair his host pushed hospitably close to the sea-coal fire.

Captain Sephard perched restlessly on the leading edge of a straight chair, his heavy body poised as if he were about to spring up at any moment. His square hands toyed nervously with his glass. His face was deeply lined, weathered darkly by years at sea. His clothes were excessively elaborate, showing the same finicky emphasis that had decorated his room. He was dressed in black and gold like a Spanish grandee and in spite of his constant energetic motion, he seemed entirely self-possessed, confident to the verge of arrogance.

"I assume you are a member of Mr. Douglas Coult's family, sir?" he inquired with a harsh forcefulness.

"He is my uncle," James said.

"And may I ask whether your visit has any reference to Mr. Coult's enterprises in New York?"

James shook his head. "Naturally I couldn't discuss that, Captain Sephard. Can you tell me where I might find my uncle?"

Captain Sephard's face was a sensitive vehicle. An emotion once felt was immediately displayed. His annoyance was mild, but it was clearly visible to James. A remarkably transparent man for a merchant, he thought, although such openness seemed suitable to a ship's master.

"Mr. Coult is, for most practical purposes, retired," the captain said sharply. "All business affairs rest with me."

"All?"

"All, sir. Naturally, Mr. Coult's advice is always available to me."

"I see," James said in a noncommittal murmur. "I have no wish to offend your sensibilities, Captain. I'm sure a man in your position will readily understand that any business I have with my uncle must remain confidential, at least for the moment. You are my uncle's partner, I believe your clerk said?"

"For the past six months," Captain Sephard said irritably. "Any business you may have with Coult and Company will ultimately be brought to me, so—" He spread both hands in a quick, conclusive gesture.

"This is merely one branch of Coult and Company, Captain. Probably you know that Sir Ruthven has not yet been advised that you have joined my Uncle Douglas in this branch."

Captain Sephard's dark face hardened with restraint. His thin mouth pinched down savagely to repress his initial response. He drew in a long slow breath. "You do not suggest there has been anything improper or underhanded about my joining the company?"

"Certainly not, sir," James said sincerely. "If my uncle wishes to refer me to you, I shall be happy to follow his instructions."

Captain Sephard sipped from his glass slowly. He stared down at the dark surface of the wine for a brief moment, then gulped the remainder and set the glass down with a soft crash.

"Mr. Douglas Coult has no reason to feel kindly disposed toward Sir Ruthven. You may know that he has often—"

"I cannot discuss my family with you, Captain," James said with quiet firmness.

Captain Sephard's face grew swiftly red, tightened with strain. "I would know you for a Coult anywhere," he said with a puzzling intensity.

"You will moderate your tone when you speak to me, sir," James said briskly. He rose and put his untouched glass on the writing table. "If my uncle wishes you to know our family affairs, doubtless he will tell you. I certainly shall not."

Captain Sephard came quickly to his feet. His lithe, expectant posture held a clear menace. Then with a visible effort, he forced a tight smile. He gestured expressively with both hands.

"Please forgive me for pressing you, Mr. Coult. I am a rough seaman and the graceful word seldom comes easily. If I have offered offense, I am sorry."

"I am not offended, Captain," James said readily. "I have called to see my uncle. Could you tell me where I might find him?"

"Of course, sir. Of course," Captain Sephard said expansively, as if eager to wipe away all bad feeling by a show of unusual co-operation. "You probably know that Mr. Coult has been in poor health lately. Miss Luisa has asked me to spare him any concerns which I am capable of managing alone. But of course you will wish to see him at once. Let me see if Billings knows whether—" Sephard swung energetically around his desk and moved toward the door. "You are staying in town, Mr. Coult? Or did you—"

"I am lodging at the Queen's Head, Captain."

Sephard nodded. "An excellent establishment," he said. "One moment, please."

James shifted to a more comfortable position and thrust his legs out straight before him. A strange sort of man, Captain Sephard. Exceptionally forceful, and not at all diplomatic, though his bluntness was refreshing at times. Such men were probably more suited to the problems of a new world than any London-trained merchant would be.

"I am sorry, Mr. Coult," Sephard said from the doorway. He returned to his table and stood there, frowning. "I thought that Miss Luisa planned to come into town this morning, but Billings says he has not seen her today. I suggest you call at Mr. Coult's house this afternoon. I shall probably be there also."

"I shall be pleased to see you again," James said politely. "Mr. Coult's house is close to New York?"

"A short distance to the north, sir. In a pleasantly rural area known as Turtle Bay where most of our leading merchants have their estates. Tell your coachman to drive out the Bowery toward the Boston Post Road. Mr. Coult's house is called Braeburn."

"Of course," James murmured. Braeburn was also the name of the family manor in Scotland. Once again, the knowledge of his uncle's nostalgia for his lost boyhood touched James sharply. "I may expect that you will advise my uncle of my arrival?"

Captain Sephard stared closely at James. His dark eyebrows almost met in a thoughtful frown. Then, in another of his swift alternations of mood, he smiled quickly. "Whatever your business, Mr. Coult, I can see that it has been entrusted to a clever young man."

James shook his head. "I wish that were true, Captain Sephard. Thank you for your courtesy."

"Come, sir, come," Sephard insisted with a sudden jovi-

ality. "You haven't touched your glass. Am I to assume you disapprove of my wine?"

James took up the glass again. He bowed slightly over the rim and sipped for politeness' sake. A syrupy sherry coated his tongue softly like warm honey. "Sickening sugar-water," Sir Ruthven would have termed it. James choked down another sip, murmured his thanks, and turned toward the door.

Captain Sephard stood unmoving beside his ornate table, one square hand clenched tightly on the dark glossy surface. He bowed as James paused. His thin smile, his dark narrowed eyes remained fixed in speculative challenge until James turned away.

◀ CHAPTER 5 ▶

CONSIDERED EVEN by London's standards, the Queen's Head was an excellent tavern. Brisk weather and mild exercise had brought him a ravenous appetite and James thoroughly enjoyed his dinner of oysters, a strange fish called shad that contained a magnificent roe, roast sirloin with potatoes, parsnips and carrots well browned. He drained his claret glass and allowed the serving man to persuade him that a pint of port, a nibble of cheese, a few raisins and walnuts would be quite sufficient.

Behind him Crutchfield teetered impatiently, gazing with a London-jaundiced eye down the crowded Long Room, comparing the boisterous clients here with those he had briefly glimpsed at White's and Almack's. In that relaxed moment James thought of asking for his opinion of the company, but then thought better of it, for an inch given to Crutchfield became a yard in a twinkling; no inch for Crutchfield. James sipped his port with a pleasurable laziness, watching his fellow diners casually.

Being handy to the Royal Exchange, the Queen's Head enjoyed a clear preference amongst the trading merchants. In spite of Uncle Ruthven's fears, most of them seemed fairly prosperous. James devoted his final glass of port to a consideration of the question of swords. In London there had never been a question; gentlemen wore swords as they wished; others did not, on pain of severe punishment. But in New York there seemed to be no clear rule that he could

observe. In the Long Room were three men wearing swords and James felt reasonably persuaded that none of them could be gentlemen. Possibly though, gentlemen in New York Province were determined by a colonial standard unknown to him. Of those present who seemed to be gentlemen, none was armed. There might be a lesson to be learned from that, James considered. Everyone knew that the colonies were in a state of semi-rebellion, had been for some years; so the known leaders, especially those gentlemen amongst them, might be careful to avoid all possible provocation, going even so far as to avoid wearing the honorable weapons to which their rank entitled them. Could that be the answer?

On Uncle Ruthven's advice, James had furnished himself with a slim, gold-headed swordstick, thus solving a problem that had been the ruination of many a young man of fashion. If assaulted or challenged, he was armed and able to defend himself, otherwise he gave no indication of belligerent capability. As always, Uncle Ruthven's advice held a steel core of sanity, as did his stick. James was slightly less likely to be challenged, slightly safer in an unsafe world. He finished his wine slowly, savoring the last drop, and pushed back his chair. He nodded to Crutchfield.

"Use a little wine for thy stomach's sake, not a whole ruddy vat," Crutchfield complained loudly. Heads in the Long Room turned toward him and he had the grace to bow clumsily. "An enjoyable dinner, I hope, sir?" he asked in that sly, smarmy tone that always made James want to kick him.

James looked at his impudent face and laughed. "I thank thee that I am not as other men," he said, hoping he had the quotation reasonably correct. "Now I'll want a heavier coat, I think. It seems rather chilly to me."

Crutchfield stared, silenced by a horrid thought. He swallowed slowly with a tight movement of his head. Then, almost without volition, he intoned, "This is the day which the Lord hath made." But his heart was not in it. There was none of the triumphant, challenging crow that usually accompanied one of his more apposite quotations.

James followed him up the staircase, enjoying his mean victory. But a moment later, seeing Crutchfield's silent, brooding face in the dim hallway, he regretted his foolishness. Biblical tags were Crutchfield's province. Any invasion by James was thoroughly offensive. No more, he resolved soberly. Few triumphs were available to Crutchfield and James would never again try to steal one from him.

James stripped off his light silk coat and gave it to Crutchfield. He went to the cupboard for a heavily lined velvet

coat more suitable to the season. Its seal-grey-and-silver was not a good mate for his light grey smallclothes, but it would serve. He pulled open the cupboard door and then stopped still, frowning slightly.

"Draw those curtains back," he said to Crutchfield. When a pale sunlight illuminated the shadowed cupboard James bent to the floor carefully. He inspected his travelling desk that stood on its end against the rear wall. He lifted it by its leather strap and slid it out. He laid the desk flat on the bed, shifting it so that the fitted lock caught the light. Again he bent for a careful inspection.

"Let me look," Crutchfield said quickly. His knees cracked against the floor as he knelt suddenly. One thin bony finger traced along a bright, new-metal gash across the lock-plate. "He weren't a knowing rogue, not a bit," he muttered. "Clumsy, very clumsy. What made you notice?"

"I left the desk on its flat side," James said. "Where were you when I was out?" He rose to pry his purse out of his tight waistcoat pocket.

"Round'nabout," Crutchfield said dourly. He frowned heavily at James. "Locked the door, didn't you? Didn't say for me to stand guard, did you?"

"I hardly anticipated anything like this." James extracted a small warded key from the mass of gold and silver in his purse and fitted it into the lock. It turned easily enough and when the lid was lifted James gave a small sigh. There was no sign of thievery.

Wedged solidly in the back of the desk was a wrapped block of one hundred five-pound notes and five blue-paper rolls of fifty guineas each, brought for emergencies in spite of the law that forbade the exportation of British money. James could tell at a glance that none of the seals were broken. He tore the paper from a roll of coin to make sure. Untouched. The envelope that contained the documents referring to the ten-thousand-pound loan Uncle Ruthven had made to his brother had obviously not been opened. There was little else of value in the desk, merely the usual supplies of paper, ink, quills, sand caster, penknife, sealing wax and candles. His small pocket pistol in its soft shagreen case had not been moved. He riffled through a few personal letters of no import, blank bills of exchange, a draft of the purchase agreement designed for Uncle Douglas by the Coult and Company lawyers, and the detailed *aide-mémoire* that Uncle Ruthven had prepared. The two letters addressed to Mr. Douglas Coult were already safe in his coat pocket. James drew in a thin breath and let it out in a sigh of relief.

"An inquisitive chambermaid, probably," he said. "Nothing's missing."

Crutchfield nodded. He watched as James locked the desk and propped it against the door. Crutchfield hung the light silk coat on its form and transferred handkerchief, snuffbox and the two letters to the heavier coat. He held it for James, glaring darkly at the floor, refusing to speak.

"Cat got your tongue?" James asked casually.

"Didn't say for me to stand guard," Crutchfield muttered, almost inaudibly. "If you'd said—"

"Don't be an idiot," James snapped impatiently. "Of course I didn't tell you to keep watch. From now on we'll keep the desk with us until we find a safe place for it. Anyway, there's nothing missing. What's troubling you?"

Crutchfield's aggrieved mumble could not be understood. He slouched to the door, opened it for James and picked up the locked desk. He made a noisy display of locking the door behind them. He displayed the key in his thin hand and then dropped it into James' pocket. He grunted bitterly under his breath as he followed James down the stairs.

James gave up any thought of trying to distract him. In such a humor Crutchfield could nurse a grievance for days. James preceded him through the foyer.

Crutchfield stowed the small travelling desk in the boot, then assisted James to the seat and scrambled up onto his high perch. He tapped the roof when he was settled and James signaled for him to whip up. The bay gelding had been newly brushed and his haunches glistened in the afternoon sun. The air was brightly chill and the town sparkled prettily. James found himself hoping that the drive to Uncle Douglas' country house might be long and slow. He leaned to call to Crutchfield, but a moment's brief consideration suggested he hold his tongue. Leave the man alone, he thought. A few minutes' play with a willing horse and Crutchfield should be himself again.

The chaise swung out of the yard into Broad Street. At the edge of the cobbles Crutchfield reined in. "Your Honor will wish me to point out all the interesting parts of the city, such as the Royal Exchange at the foot of Broad Street?" he inquired in a harsh, impersonal tone.

James laughed easily. "Thank you, Crutchfield. As you will."

Behind him a muffled voice had no definition. The chaise swept right on Broad Street to the peril of three ambling gentlemen who did not even trouble to shake their sticks at Crutchfield. Reckless driving seemed as routine for New York as for London.

"New York has four beautiful public squares, Your Honor," Crutchfield roared with solemn pomposity. "Would you allow me the pleasure of conducting you to the Bowling Green, to Hanover Square, to St. George's or to New Gaol Fields, also known as the City Commons?"

"We will proceed directly to Mr. Coult's house," James said quietly. "Do you know the way?"

"I know the way to hell, sir," Crutchfield bellowed in an ominous tone. "May I display to Your Honor the gilded statue of King George Three, or is it Two? I regret I am not sure about that. Or the equally glorious statues of the great Pitt, or the lesser Wolfe? All are easily available, sir."

"That's enough nonsense," James said mildly. "Drive me to Mr. Coult's house, you idiot."

"I am at Your Honor's disposal," Crutchfield growled. He guided the chaise around a slow jog to the right and leaned down once more. Nothing now would restrain him, James realized. He would just have to wait for the mood to wear away. "The head of Broad Street, sir. Directly before us is the City Hall. We turn left here and proceed along Wall Street. Would you like me to tell you about Wall Street, sir?"

"Please," James said with quiet resignation.

"Built by the Dutchies, the wall were, sir. To keep out the red savages, or maybe the English savages. Now we go left up toward the Broadway and on the hill before us we see the magnificent spire of Trinity Church. Would you like me to explain the Trinity to you, sir?"

"I'll have the impudent tongue out of your head shortly. Drive on."

"Of course, sir. As you wish, sir. We turn right now, along the Broadway. A splendid avenue, is it not, sir? The pride of ignorant colonials who know nothing of great avenues. We are approaching the New Gaol Fields where the British barrack their soldiers. If we carried straight we would find ourselves on Great George Street. But we don't go that way, sir. Notatall. We bear right, we do. But let me direct Your Honor's attention to the building on the corner. Hampden Hall, that is, sir. The Sons of Liberty meet there and plot the overthrow of our noble King and master. Our landlord is a member. He has invited me to attend a meeting tonight."

"That will be enough, Crutchfield," James said firmly. He was forcibly struck with the similarity of names between New York and London. One would think the colonials hadn't wit enough to devise names for themselves. Hanover Square and Hampden Hall for God's sake! And Great George Street! Where in hell had anyone yet found a great George? But it

was probably understandable that English conquerors would not have wanted to retain the old Dutch names when they took control of the province. Probably the Romans had done the same in England long ago. In fact, they had, now that one thought of it. London itself was a prime example.

The chaise veered diagonally right, passing along the edge of the open commons with its line of flimsy barracks along the far border. Dominating the area from a neighboring lot was a massive pole nearly sixty feet high, cased with iron bars laid lengthwise and riveted with iron hoops. It was securely braced and guyed. From its summit swung a gilded vane spelling out the word "Liberty." The Tories thoroughly detested those liberty poles, James knew, and delighted in chopping them down. But New York's defiant standard would require a sheer hulk or a barrel of gunpowder to budge it.

Crutchfield bent dangerously low to peer under the roof at James. His voice was an overly obsequious murmur. "I am compelled to advise Your Honor that we have turned into Chatham Street. We will proceed to Chatham Square and so to the Bowery, the great thoroughfare that in turn leads us to the Boston Post Road. Would Your Honor care to ask questions about the various places of interest?"

"My Honor would like to know how long it will take you to exhaust the fund of useless information you have newly acquired."

"I regret to say I have done so," Crutchfield said with a hint of a grin. "I am prepared to draw Your Honor's attention to the fine picketed fence and gambrel roof of the Beekman mansion which is just short of Mr. Coult's estate, but I regret to say I do not quite know what a gambrel roof may be."

James' slow, deep roar of laughter merged with Crutchfield's. In that pleasantly relaxed atmosphere they moved at a brisk light trot north along cobbled streets to the Bowery where the road gradually became pounded earth, heavily sanded. The chaise had need of its stout springs. Even so, James was nearly thrown out more than once.

He sat back and braced his feet hard against the dashboard, pulling his hat forward against the afternoon sun. A fine, stimulating day, he felt, and a very interesting city. He was wondering what aspect of it would most appeal to Uncle Ruthven. Would his uncle be surprised to know that New York had street lamps on its principal avenues, spaced only ten feet apart (no more than London itself) and that its cobbled streets were obviously swept more often than in London? The shortage of fresh water might be an interesting note to Uncle Ruthven, especially with some mention of the

Tea-Water men who bellowed through the city with their barrels of clear spring water. And what else? Uncle Ruthven of course knew that the original city had been built by the Dutch, so he would hardly be amused to hear that most of the houses here were brick, solidly built and foolishly gabled. The newer houses were London-designed, admirable enough, but hardly worth a Londoner's attention. What Uncle Ruthven would want to hear about was not a city, but the people in it. Especially his brother.

And so did James. He pounded at the roof with the ferrule of his stick. "Whip up, Crutchfield. No more dawdling, man."

For his impatience he received a painful jolting over the next mile of rutted road. Then Crutchfield reined in, delayed only a moment, as if he had driven this route all his days. He swung the chaise confidently to the right and moved on at a gentler pace.

"The Beekman mansion to your left, sir," he called almost absently, not troubling to lean down. "The Coult estate should begin about—now." The chaise slowed even more as Crutchfield stood to peer over the high bare trees. James could feel the shift of weight when he seated himself again. The gelding picked up a lively trot for brief distance, then slowed again as it neared an unattended gate set in a low, white-painted rail fence.

"What will you give me, Mr. Douglas Coult, an I deliver your nephew unto you?" Crutchfield swung the gate back and bowed low to James. He straightened and his dense sandy eyebrows cocked with clear challenge.

James recognized the quotation. Every child knew what Judas had said. A response offered itself readily, but James merely nodded. One more capping reference from him and Crutchfield would sulk for a month. "I cannot speak for my uncle," he said, "but I can promise you a thick ear if you don't move smartly."

Crutchfield grinned his triumph. He led the chaise through, stopped it long enough to secure the gate again, and clambered quickly up to his high seat. The chaise rolled up the long curving entrance drive through a lane of bare dark trees toward a high, tiled-roof house only vaguely visible in the distance.

◀ CHAPTER 6 ▶

THE DRIVE wound away in front of the chaise, climbing and turning through a small wooded park where the first traces of green were showing in the open stretches between enormous bleak trees. The glade grew thinner gradually and far ahead on the crest of a low hill, James could make out the sharp outline of a country house, high and bulky against the sky.

A tightly pruned hedge ringed the sloping lawns and once through the opening, the drive circled a rose garden in a slow ellipse and mounted easily to the summit. Off to the right a silver dazzle was reflected from a placid sheet of water and the unexpected, brilliant light made the grounds seem strangely greener, as though spring had advanced more quickly here, touched more warmly at the lilac bowers and fresh-turned flowerbeds.

The graveled drive had been recently scraped and the tracks of a great many carriage wheels were clearly visible. Short of the house, a secondary drive curved to the left and it was that route which the wheel tracks had followed. Crutchfield halted and leaned down for instructions.

"Straight on to the house," James said promptly. It appeared that Mr. Douglas Coult was entertaining half the province somewhere on his grounds, but James had not been invited. He thought it more prudent to make his appearance with all routine formality.

Terraced steps led up to a white-columned portico. Crutchfield swept around to the entrance, scattering gravel as he kicked on the brake. He leaped down, slammed the step into position and posed himself erectly, hand braced against his hip to offer James a support if he needed it. His small active eyes darted around the graceful house with obvious approval.

He turned slowly as James dismounted from the chaise. He stooped to lift the step and then froze in position, his mouth dropping open slightly in his amazement.

"Bless my soul!" he whispered with incredulous glee. "It's a race meeting!"

Following Crutchfield's delighted stare, James moved behind the chaise to look over the low ridge to the left of

the house. Before him sloped a wide meadow bright with sunshine. The new grass was spangled with half a dozen striped pavilions, their openings facing away toward the flat bottomland where a circular course had been laid out, marked with tall, flag-tipped posts. Far to the right, half hidden by rose bushes, was a white-fenced paddock where nearly a dozen horses moved restively.

The carriages which had preceded them up the drive were lined in a glittering row behind the gay tents, blanketed horses standing stolidly with liveried footmen close at hand. The tender new grass of the meadow had been trodden into the earth by chattering throngs that moved incessantly amongst the pavilions. From his post on the hilltop James had the feeling that he was looking at a misty, time-faded tapestry. Faint strains of music drifted from one of the tents. Green-coated servants ran to and from the house in a constant stream, bearing cases of bottles, trays of glasses, and covered dishes.

Walking down the easy slope before him were two young ladies in wide-brimmed hats held against the breeze by long streamers of bright silk ribbon. And accompanying them was a tall, lithe man in a startling blue coat and gold-laced hat. Something in the deliberate grace of his movements, the arrogant management of the long sword at his hip was unpleasantly familiar to James. After a moment, it came to him. Of course. Count d'Array, the Frenchman he had met at Uncle Ruthven's office. But it could hardly be d'Array, James told himself confidently. He was safely back in London. Even if he had crossed to New York, he could not possibly have made a quicker passage than James had in the *Earl of Halifax*.

James stayed there for a moment, watching with quiet interest. Here were gathered the gentry of this new land, the men who controlled the wealth and commerce of New York. James would have given much for the opportunity of joining them. But his presence might not be welcome, he recognized. Obviously he had chosen a peculiarly inopportune moment to call on his uncle. He wondered why Captain Sephard had not warned him of the race meeting.

"Not a bit like Newmarket, sir, but it's a brave sight all the same," Crutchfield said happily. "Shall we go down and—"

"No," James said. "Wait here."

He turned abruptly on his heel and climbed the low steps to the entrance. Before his hand could touch the heavy brass knocker, one leaf of the double door was pulled open and an elderly Negro butler bowed stiffly in welcome. He

was watching for me from the window, James told himself.

"I am Mr. James Coult," he said. "I am calling on Mr. Douglas Coult."

"Please come in, sir," the butler said, moving back. "Miss Luisa is expecting you."

In the wide sunny hallway the butler paused to take James' hat and stick. As Uncle Ruthven had told him, the merchant princes of New York kept a lordly state. Judging from his house and the superb quality of his butler's livery, Uncle Douglas was not a close man with money. And the glowing burnish of the excellent hallway furniture, the soft luxury of the Chinese rugs, showed a lavish taste that could hardly have been bettered in London. He followed the butler into a warm, high-ceilinged drawing room.

"If you will wait here one moment, sir, I will tell Miss Luisa—"

"Thank you," James said brusquely, "but it was Mr. Coult I came to see."

"Miss Luisa is expecting you, sir," the butler said with a gentle smile. "With your permission—" He backed through to the hallway and disappeared.

James smiled and half shrugged. Obviously it was Miss Luisa who commanded the household. He could not pretend he was not curious to meet his uncle's Spanish step-daughter, but he had hoped that his delicate mission might have been concluded first. He turned away impatiently and strolled toward the fireplace.

Here too his uncle's extravagant hand was evident. The room had been furnished to comport with the lustrous apricot and rose tones of an immense Chinese rug that covered all but a narrow border of polished floor. There was a bit too much velvet and satin for James' taste, but the total effect was magnificence. The fruitwood tables and chairs were better than any he owned. The pair of low French couches in rose satin looked too delicate for their unusual size but after a moment's consideration he could see the splendid, daring sense of proportion that brought them perfectly into balance.

James settled himself comfortably in a large wing-backed chair near the fireplace and gave himself a thoughtful pinch of snuff. He leaned back, contemplating a rack of decanters on the table before him. Silver discs dangling around the necks offered Madeira, sherry, port. For an instant he was tempted, but once again he reminded himself that in spite of the family relationship, he was not an invited guest.

He fingered a velvet-bound volume of French verse and

put it carefully back on its gilt stand. He rested his head against the high back of his chair and closed his eyes. The big house was very quiet. From outside he could hear only a frail rhythmic strain from the musicians in their pavilion, and the restless sound of his horse pawing at the gravel in the driveway. James yawned and opened his eyes, fighting off the strange languor that the house seemed to create. He focussed on a pair of portraits over the chimneypiece, forcing himself to observe them attentively.

The picture on the right which caught the direct sunlight seemed to have been painted with a brighter palette than its mate. From its gilded frame a mysteriously smiling woman dominated the room. In life she must have been a wondrously striking lady, James thought. Her gown was looped and jeweled in a fashion long since outmoded, but her gravely confident eyes, her pensive mouth and magnificent dark hair were as vibrant and alive as the sunrise. The portrait of the man in the matching frame was not worth such regard. His fleshy, self-satisfied smirk was slightly repulsive. It had been painted by a far less gifted artist. James rose, stretched wide and moved closer to inspect the woman's portrait. A master's hand indeed, he realized. The skin almost glowed. She was—

"My mother," a girl's voice said quietly behind him.

James spun on his heel.

She stood in the entrance, the portrait's face with the same calm gaze, the same thoughtful half smile. The gown was simpler now, a draped muslin hugely skirted and embroidered with nosegays of clustered flowers. And the meticulous coiffure now was the more softly dressed arrangement of a young lady at home, with a garlanded loop touching each shoulder. Beyond that she was the portrait, alive, breathing, flushed with movement and the exhilaration of living.

James bowed quickly, clumsily. "Forgive me. I was so struck with the resemblance that I couldn't help staring. A magnificent painting."

"It is often admired," the girl said casually. "You are Mr. James Coult? I have been expecting you."

"And you, of course, are Miss Luisa," James said. "My Uncle Ruthven told me your mother was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. He will be pleased to hear that her daughter is the very image of—"

The girl lifted one hand with a brisk, imperious gesture. Her wide candid eyes crinkled with a sort of cynical amusement.

"Please spare me the compliments, Mr. Coult. We are not on such intimate terms. Will you be seated?"

James waited until the girl had settled herself in a corner of one of the long couches. Then he resumed his chair. She sat very still and straight, watching him with a cool detachment, as if he were some newly discovered bug that might merit closer study.

"I am not usually so forward, Miss Luisa, but seeing the portrait and then you in such quick succession has rather addled my wits. Please put it down to the forgiveable presumption of a cousin, and possibly we can—"

"We are not cousins, Mr. Coult," the girl said with a chill reproof. "We share no relationship whatever."

"Quite true," James muttered. What in heaven's name ailed the girl? he wondered. Surely a clumsy compliment wouldn't offend her to that degree. James cleared his throat gently. "I hope you will forgive me for appearing without warning. Uncle Ruthven wanted me to call upon your step-father and a letter would not have reached here before I did. So I have taken the liberty of presenting myself unannounced."

"Captain Sephard has already told us," the girl said with no sign of interest.

"That's hardly the same thing," James said. "So an apology is necessary. I gather this is not the most convenient moment for me to call upon my uncle, judging by the number of guests you are entertaining. Would you prefer that I return another time?"

"My father is completely indifferent, sir."

James knew that he must be gaping in surprise. He saw the girl's lips twitch slightly in amusement at his expression, but her eyes remained cold and very watchful.

"I would be sorry to believe that," he began awkwardly.

"You may believe it, sir. Your opinion is not important."

"My only opinion at the moment is that you dislike me," James said with an edge to his voice. "I don't suppose that is important to you, either, but possibly you would explain why?"

The girl seemed to grow taller. Her shoulders squared and her chin lifted. She might have been carved from ivory for all the expression she displayed. Clearly there would be no explanations from her.

James waited another brief moment. "Thank you for receiving me, Miss Luisa. I mustn't keep you from your guests any longer. My business here is with your step-father." He used as cold and brisk a tone as he would have used to one of his uncle's clerks.

Her hands were folded in her lap and James could see them clench tensely. The serene detachment of her expression was shattered by a sudden tightness. For the first time

James realized that her poise was precariously held. A wild harsh temper flickered in her eyes. James went on, perversely curious to see her response.

"I must thank you for your courtesy," he added softly.

Only briefly was there a movement of muscle along her chin line. She took time for a slow breath and then she smiled, her cool poise well established again.

"You have been received with more courtesy than you merit," she said calmly. "Do you imagine I don't know why you have come here?"

"Why—no," James said slowly. "No, Miss Luisa, I don't think you can possibly know what brings me here. But what foul thing do you imagine it to be?"

"I know, Mr. Coult," she said firmly. "I know you plan to ruin my father. That you and that evil old Sir Ruthven—"

"That's complete nonsense," James broke in harshly. "Neither my Uncle Ruthven nor I have any such intention. Where have you heard such foolishness?"

"It is the truth," the girl said confidently.

"No, it is not. However, my business here is only with your step-father. I cannot discuss it with anyone else."

"Do you think my father will listen to anything you or Sir Ruthven have to say?" The girl's quietly sure tone held a wealth of conviction that shook James' composure.

"Why not?" he asked in some bewilderment. "Why shouldn't he listen?"

The girl regarded him silently, with a faint, puzzled frown. "I see now why Captain Sephard said you were a clever young man," she said. "I could almost believe you don't understand."

"I am not clever," James objected. "If I seem bewildered, Miss Luisa, it is because that is honestly the way I feel. I came here expecting to be received as a member of the family, if not as a welcome guest. I have business with your step-father and when I have an opportunity to explain it to him, he will be the first to admit that I have come here for a completely proper purpose. You could not possibly know that purpose, so you could not possibly have a sound opinion about it."

"You have come here to offer my father fifty thousand pounds to withdraw from any relationship with Coult and Company. His share of the business should be worth twice that, Mr. Coult. Is that what you consider proper?"

James felt a chill touch his spine. Slowly he rose and took a few aimless strides around the room, stopping when he reached the fireplace. He turned back to face the calm, half amused girl on the couch.

"I wish to say two things in answer, Miss Luisa," he said carefully. "First, as to the offer. The fifty thousand pounds you mention is intended as a premium to be paid Mr. Douglas Coult over and above the sum agreed upon for his share of the business. So the offer is thoroughly proper—and generous."

The girl's eyes widened and her lips parted as if to speak. James went on more quickly, sure now of her complete attention.

"The other point is far more serious, Miss Luisa. Let me explain. My Uncle Ruthven decided upon his offer shortly before I left London. He and I spoke of it in complete privacy. The details were committed to paper only once. That was in an *aide-mémoire* prepared for me by Uncle Ruthven. That document has been locked in my travelling desk since it was written. Your information did not come from Uncle Ruthven, nor from me. In simple logic, it must therefore, have come from that *aide-mémoire*. This afternoon when I returned to my room I noticed deep scratches around the lock of my desk. Nothing seemed to be missing. I thought nothing had been taken from it. Obviously I was wrong. Something was taken."

"You are a very clever young man, Mr. Coult," the girl said thoughtfully. "You must be to pretend so successfully otherwise. How does a fashionable London banker manage such sly-minded trickery? Is it part of your training?"

James watched her closely. Her eyes were candid and amused. Her mouth moved only slightly but the smile it restrained was genuinely responsive. And slightly contemptuous.

"I am breaking every rule of my training by being so frank and honest with you, Miss Luisa. I came here hoping to discuss a problem openly with your step-father—"

"You will please stop referring to him as my step-father," she said sharply. "He is my father."

"Not actually," James said, echoing her sharp tone. "But let us pass that. The offer is made to him and the decision is his to make, not yours."

"Now it is you who speak in ignorance, Mr. Coult. My father has taken no interest in business matters for some months. Captain Sephard and I will make all decisions together. We will decide what is to be done with your offer."

"No," James said bluntly.

"Sir?"

"I said no. Mr. Douglas Coult alone will decide. The New York branch of Coult and Company may legally be dissolved if control passes from your—father's hands without

Uncle Ruthven's approval. I can assure you this is not a decision you are empowered to make. I can accept an answer only from Mr. Douglas Coult."

The girl frowned, but something about the frown was curious, almost friendly, as if she might be seeing James clearly for the first time.

"I didn't expect a man like you, Mr. Coult," she said quietly. "From what Captain Sephard told me, I thought—" she shrugged lightly. "It hardly matters."

"It does matter," James said tightly. "I'm not the clever man you keep speaking of, and I have very little experience in banking. I think my Uncle Ruthven sent me here largely because I am a member of the family. I have never before had a problem of genuine import placed in my hands. I should be sorry to fail before I had properly begun."

"I cannot feel concerned with your family, Mr. Coult, nor in the House of Coult. We lived here for many years on the grudging charity of Sir Ruthven and what little we received came only because my mother went to London and begged for help. So if Sir Ruthven is hurt or angry, I am not distressed. I care only for my father."

"Very well, Miss Luisa. You make your position clear. No man has ever gained by a charitable gesture, so I am sure my Uncle Ruthven will hardly be surprised that you feel no gratitude. All that is your affair. I am concerned only with a commission given me by Uncle Ruthven. While you wouldn't object to injuring him, I assume you would draw the line at injuring your—father?"

"My father? What has my father—"

"Let me finish, please. It isn't common to find a young lady concerned with a business venture and I am at a loss. I wish I could discuss this directly with your father. I cannot be sure how much of his affairs you truly understand."

"All, sir!" The statement was positive. The soft garland on her shoulder shifted when she lifted her chin to an arrogant tilt. "I suppose a fine London gentleman is shocked to find a lady interested in business?"

"I have been shocked fairly often today," James said with a faint smile. "But you do not shock me, Miss Luisa. Not yet, at any rate. If you tell me that you know of your father's grave difficulties and still say to me that you do not wish to help him, then I think you will shock me."

"What difficulties?"

James shook his head. "Your question makes it obvious that you know nothing of a secret venture that Mr. Douglas Coult has entered upon. I will tell you only that it is extremely

dangerous. He skates on very thin ice and if he falls, he may drag the House of Coult down with him. Naturally that cannot be permitted."

The girl stiffened and that barely controlled temper roused in her eyes. She spoke with extreme deliberation, as if she had rehearsed a speech for James and wanted to make sure he heard every word.

"You are contemptible, sir. I can see now why my father despises the supercilious, arrogant world you live in. All of you are so sleek and self satisfied, so sure that the House of Coult is a blessing to mankind. My father will never be influenced by your veiled threats, or your bribes."

"Nor by common sense," James said. "You have an advantage over me, Miss Luisa. If any man addressed me in such terms I would call him out and do my very best to kill him. But we have badgered each other quite enough. The decision rests entirely with Mr. Douglas Coult. There is nothing more we can usefully say to each other."

He saw the girl's sureness waver, but only for a moment.

"I am genuinely sorry we cannot reach an agreement," James went on quietly. "You will not allow that we are cousins, but may I hope you will accept me as a friend?"

"Certainly not," the girl said in cold dismissal.

James nodded resignedly. He had been unwise and not at all tactful. He had probably destroyed any chance for success in his mission. But what else could he have done? This self-satisfied beauty who sat regarding him with such well-bred loathing had ruined him before he had well begun. There remained only to get his final answer directly from Uncle Douglas. Then he could take himself home with his tail between his legs like a whipped dog and report failure to Uncle Ruthven. Never had he felt more inept, less able to cope with a difficult situation.

James stared at the girl with distaste growing in his mind. He shifted forward to the edge of his chair. "I assume your—father knows of my call," he said. "Will you present me to him, please?"

The girl rose quickly, smoothing her wide skirt with a graceful movement, obviously relieved to have the conversation at an end. For some reason that made James even more angry, though he tried to hide the depth of his feelings.

"Father is not here. I'm not sure when he will return."

"I'll wait," James said stiffly. "With your permission?"

The girl hesitated, then half shrugged. "You waste your time, Mr. Coult. And mine. Surely you cannot have expected a warm reception."

Her unruffled contempt stung James. He struggled to keep

his voice level and quiet. "Before you leave, Miss Luisa," he said in a sharp tone that halted her in the doorway, "I told you where the information about my offer was obtained, and how. Will you tell me who relayed it to you?"

"No."

"Surely you aren't ashamed, Miss Luisa? People who accept stolen information should have very thick skins."

There was nothing thick about the skin he could see. A bright angry flush tinted it swiftly. The girl whirled away from him so quickly she stumbled at the doorway. She might have fallen but for a slim, blue-coated arm that stabbed out suddenly from the hallway to support her.

In that brief time she managed to regain her incredible composure and when she thanked the man in the corridor her voice was as cool and steady as it had ever been.

"A delightful and unexpected pleasure, Miss Luisa." It was a brisk, strangely inflected voice and something about it made James tense with quick curiosity.

"You are very kind, Mr. d'Array. I am going back to the race course. Will you come?"

James approached the door quietly, forcing an introduction.

He was the same slender, lithe man James had seen in London and from his waist hung the same delicate, dangerous weapon. D'Array bowed extravagantly and when his head came up again, James sensed a mocking laughter shadowed in his eyes.

"You must have made a fast journey, Count," James said with a note of question clear in his tone.

The Frenchman shrugged lightly. Two fingers tweaked at his thin silky mustache. "But we were fellow passengers on *Earl of Halifax*, my dear sir. I was so sorry you were never well enough to join us on deck."

"I am sometimes a poor sailor," James said absently. "But New York is an odd place to find a French diplomat, Count. Surely you have no embassy here?"

D'Array laughed and gestured airily with one thin hand. "I have served my devoir, sir. I am no longer attached to His Majesty's service and I would be grateful if you would make no reference to it. I wish to be informal for a time. Here I am simply Mr. d'Array."

Mr. d'Array you may be, James thought suspiciously, but simple you will never be.

"As you wish, sir," he said.

"Once again I am indebted to the House of Coult," d'Array said amiably. He bowed and retreated to the doorway where Miss Luisa stood impatiently, tapping her slipper and frown-

ing very prettily. She smiled for d'Array and waited for him to offer his arm.

That scene remained fixed and clear in James' mind for all his life and even as an old man, forgetful of details, he could have described the sunlit corridor, the slim dandy in peacock blue with his long rapier tilting up as he bowed, the lovely dark-haired girl with her high imperious carriage and faint, mocking smile. A cool breeze fluttered the curtain of the open window at his back and James always remembered the fresh scent of new grass, of budding lilacs, and the whisper of Miss Luisa's perfume.

Then James stepped back just as a sharp tug pulled at his tight sleeve. The abrupt, startling sound of a gunshot rang and echoed in the high cool room, and the pleasant scents were destroyed, overladen with the harsh reek of burnt gunpowder.

◀ CHAPTER 7 ▶

MANY THINGS happened all at once and afterward James was never sure of their sequence. He heard the deathly whisper of d'Array's rapier as it whipped from its scabbard; he heard a sharp, stifled gasp from Miss Luisa, and the hard staccato drumbeat of Crutchfield's boots pounding down the hallway. James looked at the girl, who braced herself unsteadily in the doorway, staring with wide, unbelieving eyes at the short jagged rent in James' sleeve, just above the elbow where the heavy seal-grey velvet had been slashed by the bullet. James fingered the tear with a numb, almost casual interest.

When he looked up again he saw d'Array standing poised at the open window, the point of his rapier searching constantly in small contained arcs like a snake testing the atmosphere with his tongue. The Frenchman was half crouched, peering between the fluttering curtains at the wide lawn, at the growing shadows cast by trees and shrubbery.

Crutchfield brushed unceremoniously past Miss Luisa, tugging wildly to free a small pistol from the tight pocket of his coat. His small suspicious eyes roamed the room swiftly, fixed upon d'Array, and held there until the pistol was cocked and aimed.

At the sharp flat sound of the cock moving back, d'Array turned swiftly, rapier probing forward.

"Put that thing away, Crutchfield," James said sharply.

"I—I heard a shot," Crutchfield began angrily.

"We all heard it," James snapped. "Put it away."

Crutchfield glared mutinously for a moment, then shrugged.

"Wait. Let me see," d'Array insisted. With a deft, stabbing motion he plucked the small pistol from Crutchfield's hand and flipped up the cover of the priming pan. He stirred the fresh dry powder with the tip of one finger and nodded curtly. He tossed the pistol to Crutchfield and bowed very slightly to James. "My apologies," he murmured.

"For what?" James asked.

D'Array's half shrug was a masterpiece of the meaningless. "All very disturbing," he said with a brief gesture at the window. "I had not expected an attack here. Certainly not so soon."

James made a rude snorting noise. "My dear fellow," he said crisply. "You take too much on yourself. What in the name of heaven makes you think an attack was directed at you?"

D'Array blinked. His faint, amiable smile faded slowly. He flicked a quick, measuring glance at the silent girl in the doorway. His intensely cold gaze turned back to James. "I do not admire your attitude, sir," he said in obvious warning.

"Admire or not, as you like," James said indifferently. "I am always at your service, Count. But before your anger takes you too far, you might look at my sleeve." He hooked his elbow high to display the torn velvet.

D'Array bent slightly forward to look. His lean eagle face tightened and his thin nostrils pinched with suspicion. He moved back to where James had been standing when the shot was fired. He revolved slowly, measuring the angle from the window, reaching with his rapier point to indicate the small splintered hole in the wood of the door. His eyes were dispassionate, without expression as he regarded James.

"You were here," he said in a thin, brittle voice, "but a little minute before, you were there, clear of the bullet's path. No, it was I who served as target."

James shrugged wearily. "I will not contend for the honor, sir. If you have some reason to believe you are a logical target for an assassin's bullet, doubtless you know best. But the facts seem to be against you. However, this is a matter in which I would prefer to be wrong." He was talking too much, he realized. The incident had been a severe shock to him and he still felt an uneasy flutter when he tried to

breathe deeply. Even Miss Luisa, he noted, had not yet regained her customary poise. "We are Miss Luisa's guests, Count. I suggest we defer this discussion to a more appropriate time and place."

"Do you mock me, sir?" D'Array's long upper lip tightened and his rapier tip came up in challenge.

"I am trying to remind you of your manners, Count. Put your sword up, sir. There are no enemies here."

"I wish I could be sure of that," d'Array said thinly. "You and my lovely hostess belong to the same family, do you not? How can I—"

James' explosion of laughter silenced d'Array as if he had been slashed across the mouth. The muscles of his jaw grew white with tension. His sword hand almost trembled.

"Miss Luisa and I do not act in concert, sir," James said in a voice that shook in spite of his effort to control it. "Forgive me for laughing. The suggestion was supremely ludicrous, but the laughter is directed at myself. I hope my apology is acceptable?"

After a moment d'Array straightened and only then did James realize he had been posed in a lithe half crouch like a duellist. The threatened violence of the man was most apparent when it was clear that he had himself under control again. The rapier slid back into its sheath with a long soft hiss, clicked with sharp finality when it was locked into place.

"It is I who should apologize," d'Array said in a quiet, utterly toneless voice. "An upsetting experience, I'm afraid. I hope we are friends again, Mr. Coult?"

"As much as ever, Count," James said agreeably. He turned to Miss Luisa then and could not resist smiling at her mocking, enigmatic expression. "As Count d'Array has said, this has been a distressing experience. I hope you are not—"

"I am not distressed, gentlemen," she said firmly. "Do not be concerned for me. Think of yourselves. Which of you was that bullet meant for, I wonder?"

D'Array made a smothered sound but did not speak. James almost grinned like a streetboy. She was playing with them, he realized, and it said much for her composure that she was able to make such a harsh joke so soon after being shocked into rigidity. Admiration was clear in his eyes and he thought he could see a growing thoughtfulness in hers, a trace of some unsuspected reaction. Respect, perhaps. She was a strange girl.

"We shall share the honor between us," James said. "Unless you can offer a more plausible idea, Miss Luisa?"

The girl's smile brightened. "Oh, we hear such gay tales of

the London rakehellies, sir. I imagine some of our young provincial gentlemen have been carried away by them and have been pretending to be Corinthians or Mohocks, or whatever you call yourselves these days. Too much wine, I dare say. My father will speak to them most strictly when he hears what has happened. What almost happened."

James vividly remembered the reek of freshly burnt gunpowder in the room. The pistol had probably been braced on the windowsill when it was fired, otherwise the powder smell would have been dissipated outside. D'Array's politely murmured acceptance of the girl's preposterous explanation was the wisest course, James knew, but that same perverse spirit that had been plaguing him since he had met Miss Luisa now made him cock an eyebrow with an air of mild skepticism.

"I wonder if you might have seen who it was, Miss Luisa?" he asked. "You were facing the window, I believe?"

"I was not," she said with an acid bite. "I saw no one. Do you suggest—"

"Certainly not," James said hurriedly, content with ruffling her almost unshakable composure. "Crutchfield, did you notice anyone near that window?"

"No, sir. Not a soul. But there's big trees outside that come right up to the house. Anybody could have sneaked up."

"And sneaked away as well," d'Array suggested. "We had best abandon this pursuit, Mr. Coult."

"Merely casual speculation, sir. Doomed to failure from the start. Miss Luisa's suggestion is the only plausible one, obviously." His over-emphasized tone of utter approval was not lost on the girl.

"I shall withdraw to my room for a moment, gentlemen. It has been an—unusual—experience. Will you stroll down to the race course? I shall rejoin you later. Possibly Count d'Array will show you the way."

"Mr. d'Array, dear lady, I beg of you. Allow me my new simplicity. I shall be happy to go with Mr. Coult. After you, sir."

Miss Luisa remained beside the doorway and her farewell curtsey was a gracious movement. Her eyes danced with mockery when she looked at James, but he could not help thinking that mockery was some slight improvement over the contempt she had earlier shown him.

He took his hat and stick from the stand and waited while d'Array settled his hat meticulously upon the center of his curled wig, with the aid of a small pocket mirror.

"A magnificently beautiful young lady," d'Array said in a

connoisseur's tone. "Too fiery a temper for polite society, I fear, but great verve, great style. She would be treasured in Paris, given a little training. You are cousins, I believe?"

"In a manner of speaking," James said absently. He watched Crutchfield extract his travelling desk from the boot of the chaise and run to join them as they strolled down the slope toward the gay striped pavilions that bordered the flag-marked race course. "Miss Luisa's step-father is my uncle, but actually I am not related to her."

"Ah, it becomes clear. You arrive then on a matter of business with your uncle?"

"I will not know until I have seen him, Count. I'll ask him then. Have you had time to appraise the horses yet? I was hoping you could recommend a wager for me."

"A great raw-boned black stallion looked most promising, I thought. What is the procedure here in New York? Matched races between two horses, or an entire field at once?"

"I have no experience with New York customs, sir. A combination of both is likely, I imagine." James glanced over his shoulder. "Do you know, Crutchfield?"

"Two-horse races, sir. Post and pay," Crutchfield said promptly. "They run off three whilst you was inside. The black lost his by four lengths."

D'Array's laughter was easy and quick. He led the way around behind the pavilions to a small knoll where they would have a clear view of the entire course.

The line of open-fronted pavilions behind them was crowded with a busy, excited bustle. Gentlemen scrawled in their betting books or slapped down wads of banknotes. The ladies squealed and tittered and kept the servants running to the house and back again with trays and bottles and other comforts.

"Each pavilion contains a pretty maiden on display. The best, I should say, inhabits the green-and-pink one," d'Array muttered with the faintest possible movement of his lips. "The young gentlemen promenade from one to the other like buyers at a country fair, presenting their barbarous compliments and drinking too many toasts at each stop. I have been presented along the line, but I am ashamed to admit that I forgot the names. Do not look to me for help, my dear sir. We shall have to find—"

D'Array broke off and raised his laced hat in a wide circle overhead. "I see Captain Sephard in the crowd over there. He is just the man to— Ah, Captain. May I present Mr. Coult from London? Captain Sephard, sir, is the—"

"I presented myself to Captain Sephard this morning,"

James said with a stiff bow. "A pleasure to see you again, sir."

"We are honored, Mr. Coult," Sephard said in a wine-thickened voice. "Luisa told me you had a slight—accident up at the house."

She must have been quick about it, James thought, to have sent word before he and d'Array could arrive at the track. He stared at Sephard's flushed, arrogant expression. The Captain shifted restlessly, never still, his eyes always on James.

"No, Captain," James said quietly. "I don't think we had an accident."

"But Luisa said—" Sephard's wide mouth clamped closed. He glared at James, then forced a thin, twisted smile. "You have an eccentric sense of humor, sir." He moved his head sharply and a liveried footman came racing up the knoll balancing a tray of filled wineglasses in both hands. "D'Array says my claret is good. What's your opinion?"

"My opinion wouldn't be worth having, Captain," James said, waving the tray aside. "I called to see Mr. Douglas Coult. Could you direct me to—"

"He's not here," Sephard said quickly. He licked wine from his lips and put back an empty glass. "An old friend was too ill to come to the race meeting, so Mr. Coult went off to visit him. He probably won't be back until late tonight. There's little point in your waiting, I'm afraid."

"I have nothing better to do, Captain. It's a pleasant place to wait. I suppose I might lay a wager if something catches my eye?"

"Cash only, Mr. Coult. Post and pay."

"Cash can be managed," James said.

Sephard seemed to have changed since their first meeting, he thought. Then the Captain had been bluff, hearty and very direct. But now he eyed James with a barely concealed truculence as if a sense of injury burned within him. But Sephard's attitude had small meaning to James; they had no business to transact together.

James looked around for Crutchfield. He could barely make out his crumpled hat and tight green coat far away near the paddock. Crutchfield was leaning over the white fence, deep in conversation with one of the silk-capped jockeys. Trust Crutchfield, James thought. One glimpse of a race course and he loses all sense of time or duty. But he still had James' travelling desk clamped safely under one arm.

"What would you say to a hundred guineas on the next race, Captain?" he asked.

"Cash?" Sephard demanded in a belligerent tone.

"Post and pay," James agreed mildly.

"On what horse? What's your choice?" Sephard took another glass from the footman's tray and peered at James across the wine.

"I'll stroll down and look at the horses first. Shouldn't take long. Will you come, d'Array?"

"Yes, I should like—"

"Stay here," Sephard snapped. Then, as if he belatedly realized how peremptory he had sounded, he forced a tight smile. "I'd appreciate your opinion on a matter of some importance, sir. If you could indulge me, Count?"

James bowed himself away and then turned to walk down the long straightaway to the paddock at the far end. He moved slowly, his hands clasped behind his back, his face strained and thoughtful.

It was strange that Miss Luisa had not known d'Array's title. But Captain Sephard had used it with the casual ease of long practice. Did that mean something? James fingered the short rip in his velvet sleeve. And just what had that bullet meant? An accident, as Miss Luisa and Sephard would like him to think? Or the assassin's attack that d'Array believed it to be?

But neither question had any direct bearing on his mission and he forced them out of his mind. He would amuse himself with the races until Uncle Douglas returned to Braeburn. After that he would probably know the answers to many perplexing questions.

◀ CHAPTER 8 ▶

CRUTCHFIELD GLANCED up as James approached the paddock railing. He nodded curtly and resumed his intent, low-voiced conversation with a short, withered man whose sly, deep-lined face was far too serious and somber to match his bright jockey's silks. The little rider was standing on the bottom railing to bring his head up to a level with Crutchfield's.

James touched Crutchfield's shoulder lightly.

"Which pair is meant for the next race?" he asked.

"Them being saddled," Crutchfield said briefly. He jerked a thumb to the left and turned away.

The horses were ill-matched. One was a small-boned bright

chestnut filly with the sloping quarters and flat cannons of a racer. She minced delicately away from a stolid, rugged grey whose sharply let-down hocks suggested speed, but who looked too old for a sustained effort. In the sunlight the grey's light dapples seemed to turn to a chalky blue.

"Which is the favorite?"

"Blue Peter," Crutchfield said impatiently. "Never lost yet, eh, Wullie?"

The tight-faced little jockey glared up at Crutchfield. His incredibly heavy eyebrows made a solid bar across his forehead. "Ye blather o'ermuch these days, Callum," he muttered darkly.

"'Tis me master," Crutchfield said with a grin. "A fine gentleman and Scottish as the heather. So will the horse run or will it be Wullie Caldune as does the running?"

"You're riding in this race, are you, Wullie?" James asked pleasantly. "Which is your mount?"

"He's up on Dragonfly," Crutchfield said. "A sweet, swift little darling she is, but she don't seem to win. Always stumbles in the stretch, eh, Wullie? Or bears out on the turn, eh? Or—"

"Enough, Callum," the jockey growled.

"Will it be a race, then, Wullie?" Crutchfield demanded with a strange, forceful insistence.

"Ye canna be serious, Callum," the jockey said gloomily. "Ye well ken what would happen to me."

"Nothing so bad as a trip back to London, though," Crutchfield suggested softly. "For old times' sake, Wullie, make it a race, eh? Let the little filly run away with ye. Will ye race, Wullie?"

"Aye." The little man knuckled his forehead to James and stalked away, walking spraddle-legged toward a knot of gentlemen clustered around the two saddled racers.

"There's a sour little fellow, Crutchfield. An old friend, I suppose?"

"Ye might say so, sir," Crutchfield agreed with a secret, impudent smile. "Me and Wullie was the sporty lads in our young days, fit for any jape. But it's Wullie Caldune the Bow Street Runners are wanting to find, not Callum Crutchfield. He's been set down long ago at every course in the Empire, 'cepting only here."

"I'm grateful for the warning," James said. "I'll be careful never to lay a wager on any horse he rides."

"No, sir, you mistake my meaning," Crutchfield said quickly. "That's all wrong. Wullie's been riding to lose right along and a sore difficult job it is with Dragonfly. His owner is looking to a prime stake race later on. The little

filly can wipe the nose of any horse in the colonies, Wullie says, but she's never come in first yet, because Wullie's been ordered to hold her in. But she'll be running to win today, sir. Trust me for that. I put a word in Wullie's ear. He'd rather win than go back to London in irons. I, uh—" Crutchfield cleared his throat noisily and stroked a grimy finger along his nose. "I was, uh, hoping you might see your way clear to—"

"Very well, Crutchfield. Half the winnings are yours, if any. Come along now. I'll need some money."

With Crutchfield trotting happily beside him James returned to the low knoll where he had left Sephard and d'Array. The Frenchman was not in sight when he arrived. Instead Miss Luisa stood tall and straight beside the ornately dressed Captain, with her wide skirts blowing in the slight breeze, her soft lustrous hair constantly shifting under a wide, garlanded hat.

"Made your pick, have you, Coult?" Sephard called out. "What's your fancy?"

"Miss Luisa," James said, bowing. "I hope you have come to bring me luck?"

"The lady's luck is reserved for me, Coult." Sephard's tone was flat, peculiarly directed as if his words had a secondary meaning.

His face must have shown his bewilderment, James realized, for Sephard smiled widely as though he'd scored some sort of triumph.

"Miss Luisa is engaged to become my wife, sir," he said in a clear, trumpeting tone of satisfaction.

"Isaac!" the girl said sharply.

"My congratulations, sir," James said. "And my felicitations, Miss Luisa. Will the wedding be soon?"

"Soon enough," Sephard growled. He took the girl's arm roughly in his fingers for a short moment and James could see his grip tighten possessively into her unresisting flesh. "Now, then, what of this wager, Coult?"

"An interesting match, I should think," James said mildly, turning to watch the horses walking up to the starting line. Blue Peter carried a long-legged Negro boy in cherry silks with cream hoops. Dragonfly minced behind with Wullie Caldune fidgeting to settle himself securely in the saddle. He seemed to be unhappy with his stirrups, James noted.

When he had turned back, Sephard was slapping a fat wad of bank notes against his chest and eyeing James with an openly scornful gaze.

"What are the odds, Captain?"

"An even match. Blue Peter is fast, but he's past his prime. Dragonfly is the better horse, but she's green. You'll want to pick her anyway, I suppose? They are both my horses, Coult, and I still have a sentimental feeling for old Blue Peter."

"I dare say," James murmured. "Dragonfly is clearly the better horse, as you say. I'll pick her. A hundred guineas, we set?"

Sephard shrugged. "Any amount," he said harshly. "Make it five, if you like?"

James signaled to Crutchfield and nodded briefly. "One will be sufficient, sir," he said quietly. He was remembering what Crutchfield had just told him about Dragonfly's owner. It would serve him right if he did take him on for five hundred guineas.

"Don't spare me, Coult," Sephard insisted. "Any amount you have stomach for." He snatched a glass of wine from a passing servant and drained it at a gulp.

James took his key from his waistcoat pocket and opened the desk that Crutchfield was holding flat before him. "Captain Sephard is the owner of Dragonfly, Crutchfield," he said. "And of Blue Peter as well. We are arranging a wager on the race."

"Any amount, Coult," Sephard repeated belligerently.

"Don't goad him, Captain," Miss Luisa said softly. "Mr. Coult is a cautious man. He may not care for a gamble."

James turned with his hand inside the desk. Did she know the race was a cheat? Did she know Dragonfly was not supposed to win? His hand slid by the rolls of coin and clamped around the packet of bank notes behind them.

"Five hundred is satisfactory, Captain," he said with a trace of nervous tension in his voice. He broke open a roll of guineas and shook the coins into his hand. "Will you count the notes, please? And here are twenty-four guineas to make up the total. Who acts as stakeholder?"

"Any of the judges." Sephard gestured brusquely toward the track. "Or shall we just let Luisa hold them?"

"Certainly," James said readily. He handed the packet of notes and the heap of coins to the girl and watched as Sephard laid an equal amount on top. It made an unwieldly bulk but Crutchfield solved the problem by offering his battered hat for a basket. Miss Luisa's smile was all radiance as she thanked him.

The horses were prancing at the rope barrier when they looked again. Dragonfly was inside and she and her diminutive rider were almost hidden behind Blue Peter and his tall skinny jockey.

"They're both out of training, I'm afraid," Miss Luisa said regretfully. "This is only the fourth race meeting of the season and they haven't had enough exercise."

"They'll do well enough," Sephard said in rough insistence. "Well enough indeed." He glanced at James out of the corner of his eye.

"A two-lap race, I suppose?" James asked. "That's a half-mile course, isn't it?"

A growing murmur of voices from the pavilions drowned any answer. The crowd began to drift toward the restraining ropes that marked the track, brilliant and noisy and already a little drunken, judging by the gentlemen's antics. The shrill hectoring voice of the judge stopped them at a safe distance. The starting judge dropped his signal flag and the rope fell. Blue Peter surged forward wildly as if he'd seized the bit in his teeth.

Both horses stormed into the turn neck and neck but the quick deft footwork of the smaller Dragonfly carried her into the lead on the backstretch. Blue Peter's jockey went to the whip with a savage flurry and the big raw-boned horse lunged forward, making up the lost distance and overtaking Dragonfly before the turn.

"I've never seen Dragonfly scamper so fast," Miss Luisa said excitedly. "Your new jockey is getting the best out of her."

"Never saw Blue Peter lag like that before," Sephard muttered, almost to himself.

The racers swept past the starting line again and James could see the great staring eyes, the bunched and reaching muscles of the horses, the taut sweating faces of the jockeys. A gollop of foam splattered into the crowd and then the horses were gone again in a renewed burst of speed, driving toward the first turn again. Now Dragonfly was on the outside and in danger of losing ground. James could hear Crutchfield growling softly behind him, and Sephard smacking both hands together as if to whip Blue Peter into a faster pace. Miss Luisa's hands were locked tightly at her throat and she seemed to be having difficulty with her breathing. Not the imperturbable girl of a few minutes ago, James thought, but even more lovely when flushed and excited.

On the backstretch Dragonfly drove ahead in a flurry of swift short sprinting strides. Wullie Caldune judged his moment and cut her in toward the flag markers at a perilous angle. Blue Peter's nose was flicked by Dragonfly's tail, but it was not a foul, though it had been close. The filly held a full length's lead at the turn, and coming into the final stretch, it was apparent that Blue Peter was lagging badly. The big

dappled horse put on a last-minute surge and his mottled nose was nudging Dragonfly's flanks at one point, but the little chestnut stretched her sharp-pointed head like a thrown spear and ran away from him. At the finish she was two lengths ahead and gaining with every stride.

"Oh, what a lovely girl!" Miss Luisa gasped. "I never knew she was so fast!"

"Neither did I," Sephard muttered ominously. He drew himself up angrily and looked far out over the field. When the loping horses turned back toward the starting line, he snatched off his hat with a furious movement and waved it in wide circles overhead. Blue Peter's jockey reached out with his whip to touch Wullie on Dragonfly. He pointed to Sephard and both horses were pulled around to skirt the crowd at a slow springy walk.

"Not you, Roscius," Sephard bellowed. "Take the horses to the stable. I want Caldune."

The Negro caught Dragonfly's reins as Wullie slid to the ground. He touched spurs to Blue Peter's flanks and turned the steaming horses away. Wullie looked even smaller, standing before the restless, menacing bulk of Sephard. He glanced up with a bland curiosity and scratched his chin with the butt of his whip.

"Run away with me, she did," he said in a thin whine. "Couldn't hold the little beast. She was wild to run."

"Pack your things and get out of here by nightfall," Sephard said in a harsh grating voice. "Damn you, you'll take orders or you'll never get another mount in this province. I'll see to that."

"I done the best I could! I didn't—"

Sephard snatched the light whip from Wullie and slashed him viciously across the face with the lash.

"Get out of my sight, damn you!" he raged.

"Isaac!"

"One moment, Captain," James said quickly. He stepped forward between Wullie and Sephard. "It is more usual to reward a winning jockey, not punish him. Surely you didn't want him to lose?"

In the stunned silence, James turned to Miss Luisa and took Crutchfield's hat from her grasp. He picked Sephard's stake from the hat and split it in two equal parts. One he handed to Wullie, the other to Crutchfield.

Crutchfield took back his hat and stared numbly at James. He flapped the loose wad of bank notes in one hand and made a low, crooning sound. "All the sons of God shouted for joy," he intoned softly.

"Put my stake back in the desk," James said. "And go wait for me at the chaise."

The jockey looked, unbelieving, at the bank notes in his tight fist. Unconsciously he wiped his free hand across his torn mouth and then stared at the blood on his knuckles. "Thankee, sir," he muttered to James. He wiped his bloody hand insolently down his chest, smearing Sephard's red-and-cream silks. His eyes were hidden under the beak of his tight silk cap, but when he tilted his head back to look up at Sephard, the hard raw fury was clear for anyone to see.

"I told you to get away from here," Sephard said in a thin, choked voice.

"I remember what you said," Wullie said tightly. "I remember a lot of things you said." He bowed stiffly to James. "Thankee again, sir. You're a real sporting gentleman, not like some I could mention, but won't. Not yet, I won't." He turned on his heel and swung off jauntily through the crowd that hemmed in the low mound.

"And what were you insinuating, sir," Sephard demanded, "about my horses not running to win? I specifically ordered Caldune to let Dragonfly make her own race. She'll flinch if she's whipped too freely. I don't want that filly ruined by a stupid jockey."

"Certainly not, Captain," James said briefly. "I made no insinuations. That's a fine filly, your Dragonfly. With a good jockey she'll probably win every race this season. I imagine you may even find some difficulty in finding anyone to wager against her again. My sincere congratulations, sir. A fine little filly."

Miss Luisa stood just beyond Sephard. James lifted his eyes to hers. She was calm as always, but the faint hint of secret amusement was not apparent just then. Instead, a slight, puzzled frown touched at her forehead. Then she noticed James' gaze and her answering smile was as quietly mocking as ever.

"It is you who deserve congratulations, Mr. Coult," she said. "You have a good eye for horses."

"Among other things, Miss Luisa. Among other things," James said with a trace of swagger in his tone. He was feeling like a hell of a fine fellow at the moment, though he clearly understood there was no basis for it. If any credit was due for winning the wager, it certainly should go to Crutchfield for blackmailing his old partner in rascality into riding an honest race with a lovely, eager little filly.

"I regret that I cannot invite you to stay for dinner, Mr. Coult. The facilities of Braeburn are fully extended this eve-

ning." Miss Luisa's voice was cool and casual. "In any event my father will probably not return until late tonight."

James nodded. "I shall return, in that case."

"But he may be very late."

"It makes little difference to me, Miss Luisa. Would it be best if I tried to find him wherever he has gone to visit?"

"No! I mean, you may return later, Mr. Coult. But I cannot promise—"

"I understand," James said. "Nothing remains then but to thank you for a pleasant and profitable afternoon. Again, Captain, my congratulations. On all scores."

Sephard managed a stiff bow in response. Then he turned away impatiently, stamping off in that odd, over-active pace that expended twice the energy necessary. Miss Luisa's curtsy was the sketchiest possible for politeness and from a quick glance at her cold, implacable expression, James understood that he was expected to leave Braeburn at once. He moved through the milling, excited crowd and climbed slowly up the long slope toward the house.

A strange, unlikeable man, Sephard, he was thinking. There had been cases before of men of wealth, secure in their positions, who were known cheats, but James had never met one. He had always assumed, if the truth were known, that such a man must be mad. The risks were appalling, the profits minimal. Only a madman would be attracted by such odds. And there was little but cold sanity to Sephard, so far as James could judge. It made no sense. Surely Sephard didn't need money so badly? How could he, a partner in the local branch of Coult and Company, engaged to marry Miss Luisa who would certainly bring him a handsome dowry.

As before, James forcibly put speculation from his mind. Sephard was not a man easily understood but it was no part of James' mission to understand him. His business lay only with Mr. Douglas Coult.

◀ CHAPTER 9 ▶

CRUTCHFIELD FLOURISHED an erratic whip on the trip back into town. He drove too swiftly for the rutted roads and even when the chaise was rumbling through the cobbled city streets,

he did not trouble to slow, but lashed his horse around and past other carriages and riders with the insolent assurance of a Hell-Fire Clubman on his way home from a drunken rout. James propped himself securely against the dashboard and wisely refrained from complaint. Crutchfield was beside himself just now, he realized and he made a mental note to speak to him soberly when they reached the tavern. Crutchfield was exultant with two hundred and fifty guineas in his pocket and the unexpected wealth was addling his wits. That much money was more cash than most workingmen ever saw in one lump during a lifetime, more than Crutchfield could hope to earn in several years. Naturally it was a heady feeling for Crutchfield and James shared it with him, remembering how he had responded to the first joyful taste of comfort and luxury when Uncle Ruthven first called him to London.

Crutchfield shouted shrill insult at a dawdler on Broad Street, then swung the light chaise in a tight arc and reined in abruptly at the entrance of the Queen's Head. James leaped to the ground before Crutchfield could climb down.

"Put the horse away and see he's fed promptly," he said. "Don't put up the chaise. We'll be going back to Braeburn later tonight. When you've finished, I want to talk to you. I'll be at dinner."

Crutchfield tapped the butt of whip at his forehead in a jaunty salute and clucked to the horse. James went inside and climbed the snug, winding staircase to his room. He changed the heavy coat for his lighter silk one, brushed his hair and tied his hair ribbon in a tighter knot. He dabbled his handkerchief in a cologne scented with lilac, wiped it across his face vigorously and rolled it between his palms until it was almost dry. Then he was ready for his dinner.

It was past five o'clock, quite late to be starting dinner, but when James entered the Long Room and selected a table near the bow windows, he passed a sideboard spread invitingly with a gigantic roast of beef, two enormous hams, both mutton and pork, and a saddle of roast mutton, none of them more than half consumed and still steaming. A spoonful of soup, a taste of fish, a slice of the joint, and a nibble of cheese would do him admirably, James told the servingman, together with a bottle of the tavern's excellent claret. The servant pressed upon him a huge, pastry-topped tureen filled with what he termed a steak-and-kidney pie, but James waved it away with all the man-of-fashion's exquisite disdain for made dishes.

James alone was still at table in the Long Room when the landlord made a stately progress through his domain. He was a big-bellied, somber man, dark and truculent of visage, James thought, but he beamed rosily when he spied James and in-

sisted that no hand but his should carve the roast for his honored guest from London. He heaped a platter with paper-thin slices and piled crackling on top.

Before presenting the dish, he picked up a boat of sauce and dabbled in it temptingly with a deeply curved spoon.

"My wife makes a fine sauce, Mr. Coult. Fit for the King, it is, as many of my gentlemen tell her. Bit of meat essence, butter, bit of mustard, bit of this and that. A little dab, perhaps?"

"Perhaps," James said dubiously. "On a separate plate, though, I think."

"As you wish, sir. I know there's some gentlemen as don't care to disturb the flavor of a good roast. Why, some won't even dash on any salt. Nothing like a prime cut of beef to make a meal on, eh?"

"Indeed not," James said with a mouthful. He ate halfway through his plateful of beef before essaying the sauce but when he did, he looked up at the landlord with the eyes of a man looking into an unknown, better world. Quickly he spread a loaded fork with more of the buttery sauce and again his expression was blissful.

"It is to your taste, I see," the landlord chortled. He spooned a mound of the sauce onto James' plate. "Many of my gentlemen take bottles of it home with them. Annoys their wives and cooks considerably, they say, but they will do it."

"And so shall I," James said determinedly. "I'll ask you for several bottles when I'm ready to leave, Mr.—ah."

"Francis, sir. Samuel Francis. Black Sam, they call me hereabouts. And 'tis honored I am to have a gentleman of taste and refinement in my establishment."

"You do your custom exceedingly well, Mr. Francis," James mumbled with a full mouth. He gestured for another cut of beef and poured out a glass of wine. "Will you take a glass with me? To toast your good wife's miraculous sauce?"

"I'll just draw a tankard of ale, if I may, Mr. Coult. I'm not much of a man for wine. Truth is, I don't rightly know one from t'other and don't like none of them."

When he had served James he ambled away to the kitchen and soon reappeared with an immense metal pot that must have held more than a quart. He bowed to James politely and pulled half the ale down his throat in a single draught. "Best ale in York Province, sir."

"I can well believe it, Mr. Francis, if it measures up to your wife's cookery."

"I have been meaning to welcome you before, Mr. Coult, but it seems you're a busy man. In and out, quick's a wink. I had a little talk with your Mr. Crutchfield, though. Amusing

little fellow, for all his sourness. Had the tavern in stitches last night. My ribs have been aching all day. I took the liberty of inviting him to come along to a meeting tonight, always providing that's all right with you, sir?"

James swallowed a mouthful of beef and sipped from his glass. He eyed Black Sam Francis with a benevolently suspicious eye, then bent to spear his last bite. While he chewed he contemplated the darkly bland expression of the landlord and almost smiled at the spurious innocence he saw there.

"Tell Crutchfield to come out of the kitchen and ask me himself," he said lightly. "Don't let that rascal persuade you to pull his chestnuts for him, Mr. Francis."

Black Sam frowned, but only for a moment. Then his big muscular face broke its severity and spread in a huge beaming grin. "Ah, I should have listened to the little fellow. Crutchfield told me it would never work, but I was bound to try. You're the sharp-witted gentleman, to be sure, just as he says. Well, I'll leave it to him, then. But it would pleasure me to take him as my guest, if it is not an inconvenience to you, sir."

The landlord rose with a surge, downed the last of his ale and moved off to the kitchen, chuckling softly in a low jovial rumble that seemed to shake the room.

James was cracking walnuts and picking the meat from the shells, trying unsuccessfully to extract an entire section without a chip, when Crutchfield entered noisily from the kitchen door and approached his table, clicking his bootheels against the bare floor with an air of bustling confidence.

"I told him it wouldn't—"

"Nonsense," James said easily. "You put him up to it. Don't cozen me, you scoundrel."

"Ah, well," Crutchfield said with an impudent grin. "When Black Sam said how you were lashing into that sauce, I just thought maybe you might be in a soft humor. For once," he added almost under his breath.

"I am due at Mr. Coult's house this evening," James said, holding his face straight with some effort. "How did you propose for me to get there? Drive myself?"

"I arranged with the stableboy to drive the chaise," Crutchfield said in an aggrieved mumble. "I wouldn't expect you to—"

"I can drive quite as well as you, my man," James said with more sharpness than he had intended.

Crutchfield stiffened and looked down at James from the rarefied heights of an artist. "No, sir," he said firmly. "You ain't in no wise as bad as most, but you're not in my class. Not yet, you ain't."

"Well, possibly not," James admitted. "But it isn't very tactful of you to tell me so, particularly not when you are asking for a free evening."

"Maybe," Crutchfield growled. "But we don't exactly—I mean, you and me, we don't—"

"It's probably time we started," James said. "Well, what's your urgent business tonight with Black Sam?"

Crutchfield glanced warily over his shoulder and leaned forward, lowering his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "It's them fire-eating Sons of Liberty, sir. I'm fair busting to find out what they're about. They put me in mind of the White Cockade, from what Black Sam tells me. He's one of them. There ain't much love for the King around here."

"They'll drag you into serious trouble with them, you fool," James said mildly. "You've barely escaped hanging more than once before. Why trifle with such dangerous business now? These people may have grievances, but you don't share them."

Crutchfield shrugged and his small tight eyes brightened with a brief, savage gleam. "I take a mort of pleasure in seeing somebody twist the lion's tail. Might even lend a hand myself. Makes me remember the '45 and how we—"

"I don't want to hear about it," James said shortly. "Go carefully, Crutchfield. I'm not sure I could bring much influence to bear in these parts. I might have to leave you behind in some provincial gaol."

"Every man shall bear his own burden," Crutchfield intoned unctiously.

"You're a seasoned old scoundrel. I suppose you can wriggle your way out of any trouble. But before you go off to your seditious meeting, leave your purse in a safe place." James finished his wine and pushed his chair back so he could cross his legs comfortably. "I've been thinking that it might be best if you turned that money over to me for safekeeping. I'll write you a bill of exchange you can cash in London. That way you'll be in no danger of losing it. You might buy an interest in a dramshop or some such thing and have a little competency all your life."

Crutchfield shook his head stubbornly. "That don't make much appeal to me, sir. I ain't what you'd call a saving man. I did put your wee travelling desk in Black Sam's strong-box, but I think I'll just keep my little bit handy somewhere. Might find another wager like the last one and end up rich enough to buy a tavern good's this one."

James shrugged. "A fool and his money," he muttered.

"Every fool will be meddling, sayeth the Book," Crutch-

field said triumphantly. "Wine maketh merry, but money answereth all things."

"Nonsense," James snorted. "Do as you like, but don't trouble me when you've lost it all. Now send in the stableboy. I want to make sure he knows the way to Braeburn."

"Wide is the way that leadeth to destruction." Crutchfield patted his pocket and smirked wisely at James. He backed a step and bowed excessively. When he turned away his quick springing stride was as impudent and jaunty as it had been that day he swaggered into Edinburgh, a member of the Prince's guard. A quick-witted, confident little man, homeless and without resources other than his own hands, but never disheartened, never shaken in his odd, irritating convictions. A man fit for this changeable, violent period of history, James thought suddenly. He watched Crutchfield strut through the door and his sober thoughtful face lifted in a crinkle of reluctant admiration.

◀ CHAPTER 10 ▶

THE STABLEBOY had none of Crutchfield's dash. He tooled the light chaise along with the slow care of a drayman maneuvering through narrow streets, but James was content with the plodding pace. He needed a quiet period to compose himself and plan what he must say to Uncle Douglas. Now that the meeting was finally arranged, James felt himself wavering, plagued with doubts and full of vague misgivings. Uncle Ruthven had felt sure that a certain innate bargaining instinct common to all the Coultts would see him safely through, but James could sense no such talent in himself.

Once out of the city the night seemed very dark, but when his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, James could make out the pale border of the sanded road against the new grass. A thin icy rind of moon was rising above the trees and when the wind veered and bore upon the road from the water, James shivered in his heavy cloak.

The drive of Braeburn was indistinct by night and the boy walked the chaise slowly up its easy loops to the lighted entrance. Again, James noticed that a glittering rank of carriages had preceded him, this time stopping just beyond the

secondary drive that led off toward the stables. All the horses had been blanketed against the chill night and knots of waiting coachmen huddled together in little groups under the bare trees.

"I won't be long," James said, jumping down from the chaise. "Wait here."

He lifted the shiny brass knocker and let it fall, once. The door opened inward on silent hinges and he stepped inside, giving his hat and stick to the butler and unlatching his cloak.

"Has Mr. Douglas Coult returned?" James asked.

"I will announce you, sir," the butler said. "This way, please."

He led James into the apricot-and-rose drawing room and bowed himself out immediately. Just before he slid the door closed, James heard a rippling burst of wine-hoarse laughter from the hall. Braeburn's guests were still at table, then. The company sounded very boisterous and gay, and for a moment James wished that he had been invited here to dinner; he would have relished a taste of gaiety for a change.

He stalked to the fireplace and soberly inspected the matching portraits once more. The lady was Miss Luisa to the life. Though the portrait seemed far warmer and more pleasant than Miss Luisa, he thought with some bitterness. Her mate remained the same heavy-jowled, self-indulgent old muffin-face and James wasted no time on him. His picture didn't fit its frame very well; it actually seemed on the verge of falling out. James stepped back and circled the room casually, admiring the wasteful brilliance of a hundred candles that made the silks and polished woods glow with a rich subdued lustre. Certainly no London salon was more elegantly appointed, he judged. Uncle Douglas was clearly a man who appreciated the first quality of workmanship and insisted upon having it.

"Does the room meet with your approval, Mr. Coult?" that clear mocking voice asked from the doorway.

"Completely, Miss Luisa," James said without turning. "I suggest you fix that portrait over the chimneypiece, however. It's about to topple out of the frame."

The girl's sharp, indrawn breath was almost a gasp. James turned and bowed. She was looking at him with wide, watchful eyes, almost staring.

How the devil did I manage to insult her by mentioning that damned picture? James wondered irritably.

"You—you don't recognize the subject?" Miss Luisa asked unsteadily.

"No," James said flatly. "Why should I?"

"It's of your—Uncle Douglas."

"That?" James whirled to study it closely. After a moment he shook his head gently. "It's hard to credit. There is certainly no family resemblance."

The girl's chin lifted and she glared with some hauteur. "That is my father's good fortune," she said crisply.

"I must agree with you," James said easily. "A nose like this is nobody's good fortune. May I now be presented to my uncle?"

"It will do no good, you realize."

"Nevertheless—"

"My father returned exhausted this evening. He has retired, but he has agreed to receive you briefly in his bedroom. You must be very quiet. And do not argue with him. Any excitement is very bad for him just now. Please remember that he is very ill, even though he may not seem so."

"I will be brief, and quiet," James said. "Will you have your man show me the way?"

"I—I will take you myself, Mr. Coult. Remember, no arguments."

About what? James thought curiously as he trailed her through the hallway and up a handsomely curved staircase. Why should I argue with Uncle Douglas? I have no means of persuasion at my command, other than Uncle Ruthven's two letters and the loan he made to Uncle Douglas. Certainly any additional argument I could offer would be rather feeble and easily brushed aside.

The bedroom was a vast chamber. By day it would command a splendid view of the river and the bordering estates, but now its three wide windows were heavily curtained in crimson damask that absorbed the light of a single candle and made the room seem mysteriously darkened, as if Mr. Garrick had arranged the scene on the stage at Covent Garden. The image of theatricality remained in James' mind as he moved softly toward the bed with Miss Luisa and looked down at the heavily jowled old man lying there with his eyes closed.

The crimson silk hangings of the bed were drawn halfway closed and James could see only an indistinct face against the pillows. The man's eyes were squeezed shut and he was breathing heavily with a thick rasping sound. His hands were folded on the silk counterpane, laced together and clenched hard. They protruded from the shadows clearly enough for James to make out the gold signet ring that was almost buried in the flesh of one finger.

"Jamie," the man said in a choked whisper. "Is that Jamie's boy?"

"Yes, sir," James said.

"Can't, can't see you. Luisa, move the candle so I can see him." The man's voice tightened with querulous insistence.

The girl shifted the single candle closer to the bed so that its rays fell on James' face. The shadows of the bed hangings darkened and lengthened and now James could see only those locked hands on the counterpane.

"You—you look like Jamie," the man in the bed said thinly. "Luisa, help me up. I want to sit up."

"You lie still," the girl said fiercely. "You've done enough moving about for one day."

"She bullies me," the man said plaintively. "But I can see you well enough, Jamie. You're a fine-looking young man. I remember your father when he—"

"He's come here on business, Father," the girl broke in sharply.

"Yes, yes of course. Well, young Jamie, out with it," the old man said with a feeble attempt at briskness.

"I have a letter from Uncle Ruthven," James began slowly. "I wonder if—"

"I'll read it to him," the girl said.

"Yes, give it to Luisa, Jamie."

James hesitated only briefly. He selected the first short letter Uncle Ruthven had given him, leaving the other in his pocket. He handed it to the girl and watched her bend it backward with a smart motion to crack the seals. She spread it open and inclined dangerously close to the unshielded candle. She read the letter in a low murmur that James could hardly understand. For a moment he suspected that Uncle Douglas couldn't understand either, but when the girl was finished, he grunted with obvious distaste.

"Ruthven says you will explain his reason," he said in a tone of querulous challenge. "What reasons?"

"Uncle Ruthven feels that the current state of unrest in the colonies makes it unwise for the family to be identified with any enterprise that might possibly bring criticism upon—"

"What arrant hypocrisy!" the girl almost spat.

"Now, Luisa," the man said weakly from the shadows.

"Ruthven was ever cautious. Let Jamie finish."

"Uncle Ruthven feels that the House of Coult might not survive any serious involvement with colonial dissension. The family suffered a great deal from the '45, and in the thirty years since then we have—"

"The *family* suffered?" Miss Luisa exploded. "It was we who suffered, my mother and I. Sir Ruthven was not concerned about us. If it had not been for the St. Andrew's So-

ciety, we might actually have starved. Were you ever in danger of starving, Mr. Coult?"

"No, Miss Luisa," James said slowly, wondering why she had not included her step-father in the list of sufferers. "I hope you will not let past bitterness—"

The girl uttered a thin, choked sound and turned away from him. The old man's hands unclenched and plucked aimlessly at the silken counterpane. The gold signet ring on his finger caught a beam from the candle and dazzled James briefly. The ring was worn thin, and had sunk into the finger, leaving little puffs of flesh swollen above and below. A circlet of laurel surrounded the central device, and James leaned unobtrusively closer to see it. He studied it intently for a moment, but that moment was sufficient to make his heart pound.

Inside the garland of laurel was a branching rose stem with two buds unopened and one dominant bloom at the top. A beautifully engraved device, clear and incisive in spite of the ring's obvious age. Whoever this man was, he had worn it for most of his life. Whoever he was. He certainly was not Douglas Coult.

James stepped back, almost lurching, before he regained control of himself. An icy apprehension gripped at his mind and he was grateful for the deep gloom that hid his startled expression. Uncle Douglas was a Coult and the only signet he would ever wear was the stallion's head—the signet that he had always used to seal his letters. Where was that signet now? Where, for that matter, was Uncle Douglas?

James straightened and glanced at the girl beyond the candle flame. She stood tense and erect, facing away from him, as if trying to master the savage bitterness that overwhelmed her whenever she saw him or any of his family. An excellent actress, James thought angrily. He was contemptuous of himself for having almost been convinced of her sincerity.

Slowly the girl turned and something in her watchful gaze made James suddenly wary. He thought of the portrait that hung loosely in its frame downstairs, the picture of a man who looked like no Coult ever born. Doubtless it was actually a painting of the man who lay in the bed, displayed in order to prepare James to accept its subject as his uncle. But James' initial response had not followed the expected path. Far from accepting Miss Luisa's identification, he had shown amazement. And that response accounted for the darkened bedroom, James suspected. The crystal chandelier that gleamed dimly against the ceiling, the branched candelabra on a table near the windows, held fifty candles that might

have been lighted. But Miss Luisa had not dared to light them for fear the old man in the bed would be exposed as an imposter.

It must be vitally important to her, James thought, to make me believe the man in the bed is Uncle Douglas. But why? What purpose would be served by such a deception?

He had been a bumbling fool, James realized. From the moment Miss Luisa had told him she knew of the secret instructions contained in Uncle Ruthven's *aide-mémoire*, he should have been alert for treachery. Uncle Ruthven had suspected that the New York branch of Coult and Company was engaged in a criminal enterprise, but it seemed obvious that Uncle Ruthven had sensed only a fragmentary part of the scheme.

James felt suddenly, inexplicably sure that the worst mistake he could make now would be to show any suspicion of the imposter who lay in Uncle Douglas' bed. And he could afford no more mistakes. Uncle Ruthven was depending upon him to show a certain initiative and intelligence, and so far he had demonstrated only a bumptious, credulous stupidity.

But no more, he promised himself grimly. I'll be fooled no more by these provincial schemers. Whether there was a fund of Coult instinct and ingenuity for him to draw on, he seriously doubted. But he was certainly not quite as clumsy and foolish as he had seemed to be so far.

"You are strangely silent, Jamie," the old man said from the shadows of the bed.

"I—I am sorry, Uncle Douglas," James said slowly, forcing himself to a calm and even tone. "I was a bit startled by Miss Luisa's reaction. I may have spoken too freely and I ask your pardon. I would hate to think that words of mine had created embarrassment for you. My manservant, who is given to misquoting the Bible, would probably tell me that, 'a fool uttereth all his mind.'"

But not this fool, he promised himself.

A thin, wheezing chuckle drifted from the shadows of the ornate bed. Miss Luisa stirred and leaned forward, patting the man's shoulder. Warning him to go carefully, James suspected.

"Ah, well, there's no need for bitterness, Jamie," the man said thinly. "I cannot pretend any brotherly affection for Ruthven, but I am willing to be polite. My answer to him is no. Simply no. I will not reconsider. I will write him a letter explaining my views and I shall ask you to deliver it for me. And now you must excuse me, my boy. I am not well these days. Before you leave for London I hope I will be able to

join you at dinner. If not, Luisa will entertain for me. In the event that I do not see you again, Jamie—”

“I hope you will let me call again tomorrow, Uncle,” James broke in quickly. “Uncle Ruthven thought that you might be willing to accept his offer without any additional persuasion. But, anticipating that your first response might be negative, he gave me a second letter to deliver to you.”

“What? A second—” There was a strangled silence behind the bed hangings.

“What additional persuasion?” Miss Luisa demanded.

“I could not say,” James said as soberly as he could manage. The girl’s wary, taut expression made him feel he was on the right track at last. She seemed stunned to realize that her well-staged scene had not concluded the issue once and for all. “The letter is sealed,” James went on quietly. “May I present it tomorrow?”

“Why, I—” the man hesitated.

“Yes,” Miss Luisa said positively. “At three o’clock. I will accept it if my father is still unwell.”

“I’m afraid that won’t do, Miss Luisa,” James said blandly. “I promised to put it directly in Uncle Douglas’ hands. Naturally, I cannot—”

“Very well,” the girl said with an impatient gesture. “At three o’clock, then. Now let us leave my father to rest. He will need all his strength if he must repeat the ordeal tomorrow.”

Another warning to the impostor, James thought. They must both feel frightened about that second letter. Possibly they realize that some element of their conspiracy has been exposed, but do not know exactly what, or how much. And that is one thing they’ll never learn from me.

“Certainly,” he said agreeably. “Good night, Uncle Douglas. I hope to find you feeling much better tomorrow.”

“Thank you, my boy,” the old man said in a weak voice. “I’m sure I shall be. Can’t keep a Coult in bed for long, eh?” His gnarled hands twisted on the counterpane and the signet flashed again.

“Indeed not, sir,” James said. He bowed tightly and turned to the door as the girl picked up the candle. He would have given much for one good look at the man in the bed, but this was no time to show any suspicious interest. He walked alone to the door and waited for Miss Luisa.

◀ CHAPTER 11 ▶

THE BRIGHTLY lighted hallway and staircase were almost blinding after the darkness of the bedroom. James moved cautiously beside Miss Luisa, his hand on the banister, blinking frequently to clear his vision. The girl stopped in the lower hall and turned to him, smiling in that faintly contemptuous way that would have infuriated James if he had allowed himself to think of it.

"I warned you, Mr. Coult," she said. "My father feels nothing but bitterness toward Sir Ruthven. We were abandoned—deserted—for far too long. Fair words cannot heal the past. I knew you would fail. My father will not be persuaded, sir. You will see."

James nodded slowly. "You seem pleased, Miss Luisa," he said abruptly, determined to shake her mocking composure somehow. "Are you really content with the way things have gone?"

"Quite content, Mr. Coult," the girl murmured.

"But you read the instructions Uncle Ruthven wrote for me. Knowing what I must do now, are you still content?"

"What you—"

The swift tightness of caution in the girl's frown was all that James had hoped for. He smiled, allowing himself a slightly mocking slant.

"I have been curious whether you actually saw that *aide-mémoire*, Miss Luisa, or were merely told about it. You make it clear that you have not seen it. I suggest you call upon your thieving informant and ask him—or her—for a full account. Good night, Miss Luisa. Thank you for—"

"Wait!" Her slim hand clutched his wrist tightly for just a moment. She dropped it suddenly and stepped back, surprised at herself.

"I am in no hurry, Miss Luisa," James said amiably. "How may I serve you?"

"What—what are you going to do now?"

"I am not at liberty to tell you," James said. "My instructions are—were—secret, as you know. I can tell you, though, that Sir Ruthven is determined to purchase your father's share of the New York branch. But you knew that already."

The girl looked at him for a long silent moment, as if seeing him for the first time. The sounds of revelry were muted and faint through the closed doors until the butler came into the hallway. For the brief time it took him to slide the door closed again, the noise was raucous, almost deafening. A wineglass crashed with a thin, bright tinkle. Miss Luisa glanced at the butler and made a brief signal.

"Don't trouble, Ord," she said. "I'll see Mr. Coult to the door." She waited, tensely poised, until the butler had retreated.

"You behave so innocently, so openly," she said in a low, musing tone. "It is hard for me to remember how clever you really are. I suppose it is a useful asset, that frank and guileless expression. You were hardly disturbed at all when that shot was fired past your arm this afternoon, and I saw you win five hundred guineas later with no more interest than you would have shown drinking a glass of wine. I suppose that when a man is totally without feelings of any kind, it is no effort for him to seem confident, and innocent."

James laughed. He tried to choke it off, but the mirthful rumble escaped. "Forgive me, Miss Luisa. For a moment, I thought you were speaking of me."

"And so I was!" the girl insisted. "Do you think I haven't seen clever, inhuman men before? My father has dealt with them all his life. I know the ways of traders and smugglers and pirates. Your apparent innocence is deceptive and quite effective, Mr. Coult. Sir Ruthven must be proud of you."

James looked at her soberly, thankful for the ability to control his expression. He would have disliked looking as surprised and incredulous as he felt.

"You see in me a great many qualities I do not possess," he said quietly. "I am neither as innocent as you think, nor as clever. And you will forgive me for saying so, Miss Luisa, but I do not think you are a sound judge of men."

"I don't need to be," the girl said stiffly. "I know so much about you already that I hardly need to judge you. Though you are most convincing sometimes, Mr. Coult. Of course you know that, and trade upon it. But even you cannot charm away the facts that condemn you."

"What facts, Miss Luisa?"

"That your impudent little manservant hid outside my window and tried to kill Mr. d'Array this afternoon. Did you really believe your pretence of innocence was convincing then, sir? I have seen enough of Coult and Company to suspect that murder is merely one of their methods, and probably not an unusual one."

James leaned against the wall. His knees shifted under his weight and for a moment he thought they might not hold him. But the shocked surprise in him was barely visible; his long bony face was frozen immovably.

"You seem surprised that I know, Mr. Coult. I also know why you want to buy my father's interest. I know a great many things, Mr. Coult, and I advise you to tread softly or you will find yourself in gaol where you belong."

"What in God's name are you talking about?" James demanded hoarsely.

"Your pretense never weakens, does it?" the girl almost sneered. "An admirable talent, sir, but hardly useful now. Captain Sephard has told me about your smuggling, your financing of pirates and freebooters, your cruel meddling in colonial troubles. Why do you think Mr. d'Array came here, except to warn Captain Sephard and me about your plans to destroy us?"

"I? My plans? D'Array said that?"

The girl shrugged impatiently. "Not your plans, possibly, but Coult and Company's which is the same thing. I did not hear all that he had to say, but Captain Sephard did."

James cleared his throat harshly. He pushed himself erect, away from the wall. "Was it also Captain Sephard who told you about the *aide-mémoire* locked in my desk?"

"Do not try your sly tricks with me, sir. I will tell you only what I wish to tell. I have said this much so that you will understand why my father will never sell his interest to you and that horrible old ruffian Sir Ruthven. No matter what threats you may use."

Indignation and fury made James' hands shake. He knew he could not trust himself to speak just then. Slowly his fists clenched into painful knots and his jaw muscles ached with tension. He waited until the seizure had passed and by then he realized that nothing he could say would have any effect upon Miss Luisa. But he could not leave matters as they were.

He must say something, do something. But what? He and Uncle Ruthven had been denounced as murderers, thieves, pirates. He could not stand here stupidly idle and be convicted by default. It had taken a great deal of courage—and hatred—for Miss Luisa to speak out with such brutal frankness. He did not yet know the basis for her hatred. Her courage was clear, though, in every line of her arrogantly erect figure, most especially in the firm set of her lifted chin. James looked away, furious with himself for his inability to face down this preposterous challenge.

He could almost hear Uncle Ruthven's spuriously languid

voice warning him to go slowly. "Never follow another man's lead, dear boy," he always said, "except at whist. If you cannot take command of a situation, let it pass and wait for a better chance."

Excellent advice, James knew, but impossible to follow. No matter how stupidly ineffectual he might seem, he had to offer a defense.

And, a quiet warning voice said in his mind, he would be wise to make no reference to the man lying upstairs in Uncle Douglas' bed. Knowing the man to be an impostor gave James a weapon of unknown value and he dared not use it carelessly. The only defense open to him now was attack.

"Good night, Mr. Coult," the girl said coldly. "You will find your hat on the stand near the door."

"Not just yet, Miss Luisa," James said sharply. "I cannot leave here without telling you that every word you have said about me is untrue. I realize that these lies do not originate with you. You mentioned Captain Sephard as the source for one lie. Is that gentleman present in this house?"

For a flickering moment Miss Luisa's confident gaze wavered away from James. Then she stiffened and her chin came up with imperious sureness. "He is not," she said in a quietly scornful tone. "And I suspect you knew that before you inquired. Giving the lie to Captain Sephard would require more courage than you possess, Mr. Coult."

James held himself still and tried to keep his voice level. His mouth seemed stiff and unnatural. "No man who cheats as clumsily as Captain Sephard could possibly be a worthy opponent, Miss Luisa, but he will have his chance." At the girl's shocked, almost frightened response, James allowed himself a thin smile. "You didn't know the race between Dragonfly and Blue Peter was a fraud? If you tell me so, I must accept it. But if you didn't know, you were the only one who didn't."

"It wasn't! It wasn't!" she cried. "Why, how could it have been? You won!"

"No, Dragonfly won," James said softly. "For the first time, Dragonfly won. The jockey pretended she had run away, but she hadn't. You know how many times Blue Peter has beaten her before. And Dragonfly the handiest racer I have ever seen. Those races were cheats too. Why do you suppose Captain Sephard struck his winning jockey with a whip? And why do you suppose I gave away my winnings? I am not quite that generous, Miss Luisa. But I wouldn't have that cheat's money in my purse."

"It isn't true! I don't believe it!"

"Ask Captain Sephard," James said tightly. "All I wish is

to be present when you do. Ask him, Miss Luisa, or I'll ask him for you. And if he denies it, I'll force that lie down his throat with the others." James drew in a quick, ragged breath, furiously calm. "You named Count d'Array as the source for another lie. I suppose he is also absent?"

"You will not sneer at me, sir! I'll listen to no pretense at injured dignity from a London bully. Captain Sephard and Mr. d'Array planned to spend the evening together at the City Arms Tavern. You could find them there if you had the stomach to look. I only regret that I cannot see you confront them. I imagine horsewhipping might teach you some manners. I hope it teaches you something, for a horsewhipping certainly lies in store for you."

"Excellent!" James said, rubbing his hands together. "Both these liars at once, eh? Excellent! I am indebted to you, Miss Luisa. At the City Arms Tavern, eh?"

"And now it is you who seem strangely pleased," the girl said speculatively. "What—what do you intend?"

"I intend to force a retraction from each of them," James said. "Or kill them."

The girl backed a step and her eyes grew wide. "You wouldn't dare," she said, but there was a questioning note in her voice. "You couldn't," she added more positively, as if she'd suddenly remembered a secret password. "Duelling is illegal in New York. It would be considered murder."

"Duelling is illegal in London, too, Miss Luisa, but it goes on. And liars must be punished." Could she be right? he wondered. Surely duellists of family and position would never be treated as common murderers even in the colonies.

"You hesitate, Mr. Coult?" the girl asked with a quiet smile.

"No, Miss Luisa, I was merely surprised to see you trying to shield blackguards behind a flimsy law. Only the worst sort of scoundrels and cheats would hide from a gentleman they had maligned. What would you have me do with such men? Let me tell you what I intend to do. Law or no law, I shall challenge both of them unless I hear a retraction and apology. If either of them refuses to fight, I shall use the horsewhip you recommended earlier. And every honest man in the province will approve. Is that clear enough for you?"

"You couldn't!"

"I could, Miss Luisa. I shall." James stepped a few paces down the hall and bent to pick up his swordstick. "You may come with me and see," he said coldly.

"I? Why should I—"

"You repeated the lies. You repeated them, dear lady, and you enjoyed doing it, knowing that only a lady could say such

things and not be killed for it. But what disturbs you? Are you frightened to see what must happen because of your lies?"

The girl's mouth thinned abruptly and her uncertainty was magically gone. She offered a faint, tight smile and James could clearly sense her mocking confidence.

"I shall be happy to come, sir," she said in a polite murmur, as if she had just been invited to dance. "I am sorry I have not the power to horsewhip you myself, but I shall enjoy seeing it. Please wait whilst I fetch my cloak."

◀ CHAPTER 12 ▶

WITH THE night's coolness, a pale fog came drifting up from the sea and tall street lamps were shrouded in misty haloes. The riding lights of James' chaise threw a watery gleam that reflected against the varnished stern of the Coult carriage that preceded him at a brisk trot.

Obviously preferring her coach to any hired chaise, Miss Luisa had brushed aside James' offer without response. Her coachman had permitted James' driver to lead the way down the winding drive, but once on the road, had lashed his heavy team into a pounding run, sweeping past the chaise and forcing the stableboy to drive faster than he was safely able. But in spite of his timid whip, the boy had not lost sight of the high, rocking coach. James shared his relief when the narrow dark streets of the city had forced a slower pace.

It was just as well, James thought, that Miss Luisa and he were not sharing a carriage just now. There was much that he wanted to ask her, but above all he was aware of the need to guard his tongue. Even putting an inept question might somehow betray him, he realized. But asked or not, the questions burned in his mind.

Who was the well-schooled impostor lying in Uncle Douglas' bed? And, far more important, why was he there? What purpose was served by tricking James into accepting him?

But this was no time to bemuse himself with speculation. In a very few minutes he would be confronting Count d'Array and Captain Sephard, and he would need all his concentration to come away alive.

What a curious pair they made, James thought suddenly. He would never had thought to link them together, but obviously some mutual interest claimed them both. D'Array had gone directly to Braeburn when he had landed from *Halifax* that afternoon, so he must have had reason to anticipate a welcome. Certainly he and Sephard had seemed fairly well acquainted, if not familiar, judging by their behavior at the race course. And they were spending the evening together, which suggested a certain intimacy. But what did they have in common—d'Array a French envoy, a nobleman, courtly, suave and thoroughly dangerous—Isaac Sephard, a ship's master, rude, vigorous, and foolishly clumsy in his villainy? A Frenchman and a—what? What was Sephard, that hot-eyed, belligerent man? Spanish or Portuguese, presumably, if the name was any clue. In background, taste, character and attitude, James could see no point of meeting between them. But together they were and that fact was more meaningful than any explanation.

Miss Luisa's coach grated to a stop, locked wheels grinding against the cobbles. The high carriage effectively blocked the stone sidewalk before a lighted tavern entrance and James had to dismount in the roadway and pick his way across the cobbles. The stableboy eased the chaise forward and around the corner. James reached the walk before the footman had climbed down from his box, and he waited discreetly to one side while the door was opened and the padded step lowered.

The tavern was an old two-storied greystone building backed by high misted trees that shimmered like silver in the moonlight. The door faced an open field and James looked at it, remembering the account Crutchfield had offered earlier. This was City Commons, he decided, seeing the line of low ramshackly barracks at the far border. To convince himself he revolved until he caught a glimpse of New York's gigantic Liberty Pole towering overhead.

Across the street, lighted tavern windows cast long bright pools into the roadway and by their reflection James could vaguely see the gilt-and-rose-brocade interior of the Coult carriage. Miss Luisa's face was obscured by the deep hood of a dark velvet cloak, but James sensed she was watching him curiously. He lifted his hat and bowed as the girl took the footman's arm and stepped from the coach. James turned to crane his neck at the painted device on a shadowed sign that swung creaking, overhead.

"This is the City Arms Tavern?" he asked, following the girl into a narrow, lighted hallway.

"It is," she said shortly. "Wait here, Jenkins. Well, Mr. Coult, are you thinking better of your brave impulses?"

James smiled thinly. He shifted his swordstick to a firmer grip. From the tavern's common room the sudden soaring shriek of a hunting horn made it impossible to speak. And when the wild, shrill note died away, a dozen bellowing male voices roared, "Gone away! Gone awa-ay! Landlord! Where is that bastardy landlord?"

A swinging door beyond a curving staircase was pushed open hastily by a wide-bottomed man in a soiled white smock. He turned with cautious haste and shuffled quickly toward the common room, balancing an enormous, steaming punchbowl in both hands. Rivulets of beaded sweat rolled along his fat cheeks and splashed into the hot punch. As the man approached, James could smell the pungent arrack and lemon of the punch, and a sour reek that was the landlord.

"A moment, madam and sir," he called distractedly. "I will be at your service presently."

"We needn't trouble you, landlord," James said. "I can hear your guests growling for their punch. If you will direct me to Count d'Array?"

"Count, did you say? Mr. d'Array, he calls himself here."

"No matter," James insisted. "Where is he?"

"He has my best rooms, sir. Head of the stairs, straight ahead. But I don't think he's—"

A furious, demanding uproar from the common room cut him off in mid-sentence. He rolled his eyes wildly and edged past James. "A moment, sir, please," he mumbled. He backed gingerly through the door. Shouts of drunken approbation echoed through the hallway. James bowed slightly, directing Miss Luisa toward the staircase.

With one hand the girl gathered the great skirt of her cloak, holding it up safely as she mounted the worn treads in a quick stride. At the top where the landing spread out into a balustraded gallery, she moved aside, watching James. With an abrupt, challenging gesture, she indicated a doorway facing the stairs.

The door was closed and from the big iron lock a key dangled carelessly, caught by the wards. James pounded heavily on the panel. "D'Array," he called. "D'Array, are you there?"

"Please do not shout, Mr. Coult." The light, inflected voice spoke quietly from the shadowed gallery behind him. "Those drunken soldiers below are making quite enough noise without our adding to it."

James whirled swiftly. The slim Frenchman was barely visible beyond Miss Luisa. He was muffled in a long cloak

and from the way shadows shielded his face, James thought he must have unpinned the cocks of his hat. As long as he stood silently, he would never have been noticed. D'Array lifted his hat and swept it low in a stiffly formal bow. His powdered wig was a bright gleam in the dim hallway.

"What are you doing back there?" James demanded in a tone sharpened by surprise. "Hiding, Count?"

"My dear sir," d'Array murmured. "Preposterous! Have you come to pay a call, Mr. Coult? An odd hour, but you are welcome. Please go straight in, sir. I regret, Miss Luisa, that this humble establishment has few of Braeburn's amenities, but such as there are, I offer with much pleasure."

"Thank you," James said stiffly, not moving. "I expected to find Captain Sephard with you."

"A pity," d'Array smiled. "The Captain left an hour ago. Perhaps you missed him?"

"I haven't yet looked for him," James said. "I will find him later. I am here, Count, because Miss Luisa told me that you believe I tried to have you killed this afternoon. Further, she—"

"My dear Mr. Coult, so many try. It is not important."

"It is important to me, sir, as you will discover," James said hotly. "She also said you accused Coult and Company of ruining her father. I throw both lies in your face."

"Such excessive heat," d'Array said quietly. "It is obvious the lady misunderstood something she heard me say to Captain Sephard in her presence. Most regrettable. But please enter, sir. This draughty corridor is no place for a lady."

Nor was it a place for swordplay, James realized. After a long reflective moment he moved to the door. He adjusted the dangling key in the lock and turned it. The door swung back upon a dark room, lighted only by the moon's reflection and the lamps in the tavern hall. James withdrew the key and reached past the girl to hand it to d'Array.

"Please take a candle from that wall bracket, Mr. Coult," the Count suggested.

James stretched to lift a candle free of its socket. The bracket should have had five candles for the convenience of the tavern's guests, but only two remained. James held the taper high overhead and moved toward the open doorway. At the threshold his shoe crunched down on broken glass.

James shifted, sliding his foot away from the glass. At that moment, while he was standing on one foot, completely off balance, Count d'Array suddenly rammed a hand against the back of his neck with shocking force.

James pivoted while falling, slashing out blindly at d'Array with his swordstick. Then he struck the floor solidly, sending

a wave of sharp pain through his shoulder. His hat went spinning into darkness. He heard quick pattering footsteps. Miss Luisa smothered a gasp. There was the muffled slither of heavy curtains running along a rod and then even the faint glow of the moon was blotted out. The darkened room was silent again.

"Forgive me, Mr. Coult," d'Array said urgently. "I beg you to forgive me. I have done you a great injustice." He spoke in a shaken, contrite tone vastly different from his normal voice.

James rolled over and pushed himself awkwardly to his feet. D'Array struck the trigger of a tinderbox, blew softly on the tinder for a moment, then touched a slim candle to the glowing coal. In quick succession he lit half a dozen candles, moving them to holders pinned on the walls. James retrieved his hat and put it on the table. Miss Luisa stayed in the hall outside, watching with polite composure, apparently unconcerned.

D'Array gestured to her sharply. "Come in, Miss Luisa, and close the door. It is not safe to stand there."

The girl moved inside and shut the door. She settled herself gracefully on a small padded chair and unlatched the collar of her cloak, letting the dark velvet fall away from her bare shoulders. She glanced at James and her eyebrows lifted in obvious question.

"Now, sir," James said ominously. He put aside his cloak and faced d'Array, his swordstick held firmly in both hands across his body. He twisted the long gold handle to free the blade from its sheath. "I will have satisfaction for—"

"Please, Mr. Coult," d'Array said soberly. "I beg you to listen for one moment. I appreciate your anger, sir, but let me explain. Rather, let me show you. Here, sir."

D'Array skirted the room quickly, with the soft cat-like motion of a dancer. Near the closed door his feet touched broken glass and he deftly kicked the shards to one side. "A lamp," he said. "I dropped it when I came in earlier. Thank heaven I didn't burn down the tavern. This is why I dropped it, Mr. Coult. Look here."

D'Array's long finger traced along the wall beside the door and stopped just under a small hole in the paneling. The wood was cracked around it in a sunburst of splinters.

"What am I to look at?" James asked suspiciously.

"A bullet hole, Mr. Coult," d'Array said. He drew himself rigidly straight and his voice tightened. "Someone across the street, probably with a German hunting rifle, tried to kill me."

"Again?" James almost sneered. "My dear fellow—"

"A moment, sir. There must be another bullet hole somewhere. Didn't you hear the shot when you entered?" D'Array turned again and scouted the wall near the door. The second hole he found nearly in the corner. He pointed to it with a finger that trembled slightly.

"It is for this which I must apologize, sir," he said soberly.

Miss Luisa made a slight, harsh sound. "You walked right in," she said in a pale, hollow voice. "With that candle over your head. And I thought it was you—"

"And I, Miss Luisa," d'Array said. "I also thought our young friend could not be the innocent he seemed. I did not expect him to enter this room so willingly. I barely had time to push him out of the way. An aging moment, I assure you. I still tremble to think what might have—"

"If you please," James insisted sharply. "I don't understand what you are talking about, either of you. I don't understand anything that has happened today."

D'Array nodded. He almost bowed. His taut, strained expression softened in a faint smile. "I am now prepared to believe you, sir," he said amiably.

"So am I," Miss Luisa said. "I—I am ashamed of what I have said, Mr. Coult. I didn't know. I thought you—"

"One at a time, please," James said. "I don't want to be distracted any further. I came here, Count, because Miss Luisa repeated certain falsehoods to me. She named you as the source of those lies. That is the only subject I care to discuss at the moment. What have you to say, sir?"

"Nothing, my friend," d'Array smiled. "Or rather, I shall willingly say whatever you wish to hear. An apology? A retraction? A denial? Which? I am at your service. After what has happened here tonight, I cannot—"

"What *has* happened here?" James demanded.

D'Array gestured toward the doorway. "You entered there with a light held over your head, my dear sir. If you had been the man I thought you were, you would have known the rifleman was still outside on one of the rooftops across the street. When he shot at me just a few minutes ago, I retreated to the hallway and waited. I felt sure someone would come to see if I had really been killed. Then you arrived and naturally I assumed—" D'Array shrugged slightly and spread his hands in an expressive gesture. "Well, when you entered that door alone, Mr. Coult, all my doubts were eliminated. The assassin would be able to see only the outline of a man. If you had known he was waiting, you would never have gone inside with a light overhead. So it could not have been you who hired him to kill me. Such is the course of my clumsy reasoning, sir."

James retreated, frowning. He leaned one hand against the back of a chair and kicked his shoe nervously at a triangle of shattered glass. "You let me walk in here," he said with a growing anger, "knowing that someone was waiting to—"

"I cannot apologize adequately, sir," d'Array said quickly. "I thought I was dealing with a man who had hired an assassin. Fortunately I was able to push you aside in time, but it was a frightful moment for me when you went inside. I had to know, sir, and I ask that you consider my urgency. I had to know."

"Indeed," James said coldly. "And what have you done about this rifleman, Count? Have you told anyone about him lurking on the rooftop? Have you tried to find him, or sent anyone after him?"

"What good would that do?" d'Array asked in a harsh tone that rivalled James' for coldness. "The rifleman was obviously hiding on one of the rooftops that commanded a view of the tavern entrance as well as of my window. One hint of pursuit and he would have been away at once . . ." D'Array eyed James and his lean muscular face tightened in restraint. "Or did you mean to suggest, sir, that I had some reason for not pursuing the man?"

"Twice today a bullet has narrowly missed me," James said. "And twice you have insisted that it was you who had been intended as the target. I don't question your honor, sir, but I am damnably suspicious of your good sense. Or do you have some reason for expecting to be murdered?"

"Several reasons, sir," d'Array said calmly. "But I did not expect that two attempts would be made against me so soon."

"Why?" James demanded.

"I am not free to explain."

"At least you can explain why you thought I had a reason to want you killed," James insisted. "Surely that answer won't violate any confidence?"

D'Array's pale eyes drifted from James and settled speculatively upon Miss Luisa.

"I have exhausted my patience, Count," James said with mounting exasperation. "My family and I have been slandered. I have nearly been killed. You will give me an acceptable explanation, sir, or I shall demand satisfaction more directly."

D'Array rubbed his thumb across the stained ivory hilt of his long rapier, then slowly, regretfully, removed his hand. His thin mouth tightened but he said nothing in response to James' harsh demand.

"Miss Luisa," James said tightly, "do you still believe me to be a murderer, a swindler, a pirate?"

"No," the girl said readily. "I—I am confused. Almost as much as you are, Mr. Coult. It is all so—unexpected. But I don't distrust you."

James nodded curtly. "Thank you," he said briskly. "I am pleased to know my reputation is restored, in your eyes, at least." He took two long strides that brought him close to d'Array, and abruptly he asked, "Why did you follow me to New York?"

D'Array lifted his chin with quick, habitual arrogance. After a moment's pause, he merely shook his head and smiled wryly. "In all honesty, Mr. Coult, I must say that I thought you were following me. I felt sure of that when you appeared at Braeburn so soon after my arrival."

James drew in a short angry breath. "Following you? My God! Why are you important enough to follow?"

"You will moderate your language, sir," d'Array said with an air of cold authority. "I understand your feelings and I have made allowances. I shall make no more."

"Answer me, sir," James said hotly. "What brings you to New York? Surely a man of your tender honor would never undertake a mission he was ashamed to mention?"

D'Array's nostrils pinched white. His lean face was very pale and his mustache bristled like a leopard's whiskers. "You offer much provocation, sir," he said icily. "Go back to that chair and sit down, if you please. Unless you insist upon fighting me?"

"I'll fight, or I'll hear an explanation," James said. "Which do you prefer?"

The Frenchman almost sighed. He eyed James with glacial dispassion, then moved past him casually. He drew two chairs out from the large table. He seated himself and gestured for James to join him. "May I offer you a glass of wine, Miss Luisa? Mr. Coult? I have some—"

"You may offer me an explanation," James said bluntly.

"Very well, Mr. Coult," d'Array said. "Sit down, please. I suppose you have a certain right. But I am in a most awkward position. Please appreciate that. I wish to do all I can to make amends but you must not push me too far, sir. Now sit down and stop flourishing that silly stick." He stared up at James tightly, then offered a thin, edged smile. "Do you remember the first time we met at your uncle's office in London?"

"Certainly," James said uncomfortably. He felt slightly foolish, poised in a taut, threatening stance, his sword ready

to draw. He flushed slowly. He secured the gold hilt in its socket and let the ferrule swing toward the floor. When d'Array slid a chair closer to him, he turned it to face the Frenchman and sat down. "I remember. You came to inquire about someone named Bols. A Dutch trader, I think."

D'Array scowled, then forced a faint, reluctant smile. "Could I have been so obvious?" he murmured, almost to himself. He tilted his chair back with negligible ease. "But you are right. I did come to inquire about Gerardus Bols, also to hint to Sir Ruthven that it would not be wise to associate with him further."

"Your purpose was clear," James said.

"Mr. Bols would like people to think him merely a trader. But he is more than that. His finger dabbles in many pies. But it is his trading interests that have brought me to New York." D'Array eyed James quietly for a long moment. "How familiar are you with colonial trade?"

James lifted his shoulders and let them drop, unwilling to admit the extent of his ignorance.

"You know of the myth that no country but England may trade directly with the American colonies?"

"It is the law, not a myth," James said stiffly.

"Exactly," d'Array smiled. "A legal fiction, let us call it, never obeyed, seldom seriously enforced. Most of Europe has always traded directly with America, no matter what the law. Do not challenge the point, sir. I see you wish to argue but please don't trouble. It is beyond argument. Accept it for the truth that it is.

"The nation most concerned in this illicit trade is Holland. Another truth, sir, that cannot be altered by debate. The Dutch island of Saint Eustatia in the Carribean is the major port of illicit exchange. It is so well known to American smugglers that they call it merely Statia. Trade between Statia and the American colonies has always been considerable, but now that the Continental Congress has again declared a policy of non-importation for the colonies, the Statia trade has become enormous. Non-importation obviously means only non-importation from England."

"That isn't true!" Miss Luisa said, outraged.

"Forgive me, dear lady." D'Array stared at her coldly for a moment. "Unfortunately it is true. I may exaggerate, but only a little. Let us say that whatever merchandise enters the American colonies these days comes largely from the Dutch at Statia. Also some, I freely admit, from the Spanish at Monte Cristi, Havana and New Orleans, and the French at Cap-François and Martinique. However, Statia's illicit trade

is carried on with the full knowledge and approval of the Dutch government. Gerardus Bols is an agent of that government."

"And you are an agent of the French government," James said flatly. "Or do you still maintain you are in retirement?"

D'Array displayed a frosty smile. "It is not important, sir. Every Frenchman is a loyal subject of his king. Let me return to the subject of Gerardus Bols who—"

"Who is still in London," James interrupted.

"Gerardus Bols is in New York," d'Array said in a cold, weary tone. "He came here on the packet *Earl of Halifax*, as you would know if you had not kept to your cabin for the entire passage."

"But I saw him—" James began.

"You saw him in London, I suppose. You also saw me in London. Both of us are now in New York. And so is Gerardus Bols. It was an unfortunate coincidence that brought us together on the same ship. But in view of the fact that it was the only ship bound for New York, I suppose the coincidence is not remarkable. I had hoped that Bols would not know who I was. He played his part very well, pretending to meet me as a stranger. Except for that I should have been more wary. He contrived to disappear the moment he landed in New York. But since I thought that Bols was on board the *Halifax* through innocent coincidence, you can understand that my suspicions at that time were directed entirely toward you."

"Me!" James said angrily.

"Certainly. Your uncle, Sir Ruthven, had often been associated with Gerardus Bols in the past. Only for profit, it is true, for Sir Ruthven is seldom involved with political matters. But when you left London so quickly after I had consulted him, I was most curious. Then in New York you made arrangements to leave the ship before any other passenger could disembark. You hastened to an interview with Captain Sephard and, when we met at Braeburn shortly afterward, an assassin tried to kill me. Of course I suspected you, Mr. Coult. How could I not?"

"But why? Why should I, or Bols, or anyone else, wish to see you dead?"

D'Array brought the legs of his chair down to the floor with a soft thud. He glanced briefly at Miss Luisa who sat quietly, attentively, hands locked in her lap. Then d'Array leaned forward. "I doubt if I can make it sufficiently clear to you, Mr. Coult. Let me put a central question, to focus the problem. What do you think will be the outcome of the current unrest and dissension in the American colonies?"

"Why—I don't know," James said slowly. "I imagine an accommodation will be reached."

D'Array's thin restrained mouth twisted slightly, not quite to the point of sneering. "A pious—and very English—reply," he said in a tone of mild contempt. "You are blind, Mr. Coult. An accommodation may be reached, that is true. But it is most unlikely as matters stand today. Powerful interests are strongly opposed to any peaceful solution. Few American merchants—please do not interrupt, Miss Luisa—few American merchants want to see a reasonable adjustment. Living under England's mercantile laws has for them been unprofitable and intensely annoying. But more important than the American merchants are the foreign countries that would like to see England distracted, possibly even crippled, by colonial rebellion."

"Indeed," James muttered dubiously.

"Indeed yes, Mr. Coult. In our day the wealth of nations depends upon regular and peaceful commerce which requires free access to markets and raw materials. Because of her recent overwhelming successes, England today controls the seas, dominates all commerce throughout the world. Such dominance would be shaken, perhaps completely broken, if England were compelled to concentrate her efforts to put down rebellion in her colonies. Holland and Spain well remember their lost empires, their lost wealth. And many men in both countries would do anything—*anything*, Mr. Coult!—to bring about a rebellion in America."

"And what of the French?" Miss Luisa broke in sharply. "Why don't you speak of the French, Mr. d'Array?"

"I intend to, Miss Luisa," d'Array said calmly. "I will not pretend we do not have a group, a very influential group, whose primary interest is the recapture of our lost empire in India and Canada. But that group does not yet control in France as it does in Holland and Spain. Fortunately we have in France a new king, a young and intelligent monarch who came to the throne only a year past. Louis XVI found his France to be wretchedly poor, apprehensive, close to complete bankruptcy. He realizes that the welfare of his people requires a long, placid interlude. We have been all but ruined by a series of disastrous wars. France needs peace, Miss Luisa, and we who support the king will let nothing alter the present state of affairs. Nothing! We wish no wars, no rebellions, no disruption of peace anywhere in the world."

Miss Luisa made a short, harsh sound, almost a snort. But it was James who spoke first.

"Very eloquent," he said mildly. "Very—you will forgive

me, sir—very French. But what has that noble dream of nations to do with you and Gerardus Bols?"

D'Array's mouth thinned and his pale eyes seemed to glitter. "I said you would not understand," he said brusquely. "King Louis XVI is young and enthusiastic. He greatly admires your George III for what he has done to restore the vigor of English monarchy. He will never willingly go to war with England. However, we who support him are not many. Every day the king is beset by those who dream of using America to drain the strength of England. Much of France, sir, still fondly recalls the Duc de Choiseul and his hope of *revanche*. These firebrands are aided by others—the free masons, the libertarians who worship that madman Rousseau, and republicans of all varieties who hope to gain by ruining France. We are constantly told of the danger that England, once reconciled with her colonies, might turn her covetous attention to our sugar islands and take away our last vestige of empire. Hatred of England is a powerful force in my country, Mr. Coult, and if such men had their way, they would bring the storm down on our heads tomorrow. If war should come anywhere in the world, I do not believe the king's friends will keep power in France. Our hopes for a peaceful future will be lost. France has already been bled white. Another war, even a victorious war, would be our finish. Now why, sir, does that sound so eloquently French to you? Is peace of so little value that you stare down your long English nose at anyone mentioning it?"

"I sympathize, Count," James said steadily. "I have no interest in war, and very little in England. I am not English, sir. Let us have peace, by all means. Let us also have an explanation of Mr. Gerardus Bols."

"Indeed yes," Miss Luisa said impatiently.

Count d'Array rose suddenly and sent his chair skidding back. "Gerardus Bols is here to encourage colonial rebellion. My mission is to stop him by exposing his conspiracy. Naturally my death would be most welcome to Gerardus Bols."

"Naturally," James agreed. "But specifically, how is Bols proceeding with his mission? What encouragement is he offering?"

"He and the Dutch merchants at Statia are furnishing gunpowder, muskets, and other unlicensed munitions to American traders. For what purpose, Mr. Coult? Ask yourself the question, sir, and guess at the answer. Is that specific enough—dangerous enough—for you?"

Gunpowder and muskets. James could hear the words in his mind, but this time in the quiet and spuriously languid

tones of Uncle Ruthven's voice. "My brother Douglas has illegally invested thirty thousand pounds in muskets, in gunpowder, shot," he had told James in London. Dutch munitions? James wondered. Munitions meant for rebellion? If Uncle Ruthven had known or even suspected that the French government had sent Count d'Array to expose the illicit traffic, he would have been even more soberly concerned that night in his London house.

James nodded. He heard himself saying stiffly, "Yes, that is dangerous enough for me."

He felt completely calm, but he seemed frozen in place. He couldn't even turn his head to look at Miss Luisa. He knew that he must try to hide any indication of surprise, but he suspected he was acting like a gape-mouthed school-boy.

D'Array apparently noticed nothing out-of-the-way in his appearance and James once more blessed whatever ancestor had given him steady hands and nerves.

"Would you be surprised to hear, Mr. Coult, that American merchants have already begun importing munitions from Statia?"

"I would," Miss Luisa broke in hotly. "I would not only be surprised, I would be suspicious of any man who said so."

"Nevertheless, it is true," d'Array said quietly. "It began late last year when John Hancock of Boston had one of his ships smuggle a load of gunpowder to Salem. The Sons of Liberty have that powder now. I imagine you know of the Sons of Liberty, Miss Luisa, those violent fanatics who are determined to force a rebellion? The Sons of Liberty, they call themselves. We have many like them in France and there we call them—"

"I don't believe you." Miss Luisa's tone was quiet, as always, but harshly contemptuous. "You were very convincing for a moment, Mr. d'Array, or Count d'Array, or whatever you are. But you go too far when you slander gentlemen like Mr. Hancock." She flicked a glance at James. "If you wish to be successful at deception, you should study Mr. Coult. He is far more subtle. I'll confess I was duped for a time. Mr. Coult must have been mad to take such incredible risks merely to make his trickery more convincing. For a moment I actually believed he had been in danger. But obviously his rifleman had instructions to aim carefully."

"What's this?" James said incredulously. "My rifleman? You don't believe that I—"

"Oh, for heaven's sake, stop bleating at me!" Miss Luisa snapped. "I knew what a clever, deceitful man you were, yet

I let you persuade me that—" Her voice soared and almost broke with strain. She clenched her hands hard in her lap until she had regained control of herself. Then her voice was slow, and very cold. "It is you who should be offering explanations, Mr. Coult. I am sure Mr. d'Array would like to know why you have tried to have him murdered. I am sure you could tell him everything about those Dutch munitions." She drew her dark cloak around her shoulders and looked at d'Array. "If those munitions have any existence outside Mr. d'Array's imagination, which I doubt," she added in quiet fury.

She rose quickly, swept her cloak into place and moved toward the door.

"Wait!" James called urgently. "Miss Luisa, I don't—"

"Possibly you will find Mr. d'Array easier to deceive. Stay here and try, Mr. Coult. But I don't think you are quite clever enough. He's probably beginning to wonder about your rifleman. I don't think he'll listen to you. And neither will I!" She pulled the door open quickly and stepped through to the hall. She slammed it thunderously behind her.

In the room a stunned silence lasted until Count d'Array sighed. He seated himself wearily and laughed with a soft, whispering chuckle. "A superb female!" he said admiringly. "Surely she must be at least partly French?"

"Spanish," James said absently. "What—what was she talking about? What made her—"

D'Array reached negligently to the table, lifted the glass stopper of a decanter and poured two glasses of wine. He held one out to James, then lifted his own in a silent toast. He patted his lips with a tiny lace handkerchief, stroked it lightly along his silky mustache. He sighed again, pleasurably.

"Miss Luisa heard an unpleasant truth," he said lightly, "and she reacted as a true female by attacking the man foolish enough to utter that truth. Magnificent! What fire!" D'Array leaned back and sipped again from his glass, watching James covertly from the corner of his eye.

"What truth?" James asked in a wondering tone, hoping to sound as if he genuinely did not understand. "You don't mean to suggest that Mr. Douglas Coult is involved—"

"I make no suggestions," d'Array amended. "But it is apparent that Miss Luisa has rather more knowledge of the Statia trade than she cares to admit. Merchants in New York form a close community. What is known to one is generally known to all."

"I don't believe it. Miss Luisa is too honest, too open and forthright to be a party to—" But she wasn't honest. James thought suddenly of the elderly impostor she had presented

as Uncle Douglas. No, he couldn't say that Miss Luisa was—"Spare me, please," d'Array said in tones as languid as any Sir Ruthven might have managed. "The lady inspires my devotion, also, but my duty compels me to logic. And do not bristle at me, please. It is quite late and I have spent a long tiring day. Let us speak quietly together, as gentlemen, Mr. Coult."

James settled back in his chair and tried to smile confidently. "Of course. Forgive me, sir. But Miss Luisa is to some degree a member of my family and I cannot listen to—"

"Of course you can, my young friend. You can listen quite profitably. I have nothing to say against Miss Luisa. She is hardly as frank as you suggest, but no matter. We are agreed that she is charming, and to a charming female, much may be forgiven." D'Array measured James carefully over the top of his glass. "But you misdirect your efforts, my friend. She is affianced to Captain Sephard, did you know?"

"Of course I know," James said, red-faced. "I have no intention of—"

"Splendid! New York has other beautiful young women. We saw many at the Braeburn race course today. Amuse yourself with one of them, until you leave for London." D'Array smiled with open amusement. "Will you stay much longer?"

"I also have a mission, Count."

"I know. Captain Sephard spoke of it. But he will not sell, Mr. Coult. I think you waste your time trying to persuade him."

"He told you?" James asked sharply. "When?"

D'Array blinked. He drained his glass and put it down. "When? He drove me to Braeburn shortly after you had called at his counting-house. He mentioned it then. Is that important?"

James shook his head. "No," he said, pretending a casual tone. But it was important, he knew. It answered one of the questions that had been plaguing him. He had not explained his mission to Sephard. But at some time during the morning his travelling desk had been forced open. If Sephard had known of his secret instructions shortly afterward, it seemed obvious that Sephard, or someone sent by him, had broken into the desk. Another point to discuss with Sephard, James thought grimly.

He looked up at d'Array. The Frenchman stretched at his ease, relaxed in a careless posture. Yet he was convinced that someone was trying to kill him. What sort of man was it who could lounge comfortably so soon after a hidden rifleman had fired at him from the darkness? James

pushed the question from his mind. Much about d'Array was beyond his understanding, he suspected. He accepted the Count's explanation; his motives seemed sincere, but they were extremely—French. No other word would suffice. D'Array's actions were determined by motives that were not easily comprehended by anyone who was not personally concerned with the future of France. And James' entire mind was concentrated upon the future of the House of Coult.

"My business here," James said quietly, "is with Mr. Douglas Coult, not Captain Sephard."

D'Array shrugged. "There is small difference, I gather."

"Are you friendly with Sephard?" James asked abruptly.

"In a manner of speaking," d'Array said with a trace of wariness in his voice.

"I thought he might have told you why he refuses to sell? It can't be a question of profit, for no merchant is making a profit in New York."

"Not legally, no," d'Array agreed amiably. "But there is profit to be found."

"In munitions? Is that what you mean? That Sephard is importing unlicensed munitions from Statia?"

"Certainly not." D'Array's denial was sharp and decisive. "I meant merely that all trade is illegal at the moment, as you should know. Every colonial merchant lives by smuggling. That is no concern of mine."

"But you have a mission here, Count," James went on insistently. "You are seeking the merchants who are importing munitions. At the same time you are on intimate terms with Captain Sephard. Why? Is there some connection between—"

"Enough!" D'Array's voice was a whiplash. He rose briskly and stood over James. "You forget your manners, sir. I have warned you before. Captain Sephard is an old friend. He has given me valuable assistance. I know him to be an honorable man. Now, Mr. Coult, I must ask you to excuse me."

Sephard an honorable man! That high-stomached, overdressed blackguard who broke into private desks, who cheated at horse races, was an honorable man in d'Array's judgment. James stared coldly at the Count. The man's a fool, he thought. He almost said it aloud.

"I suspect you are not being frank with me, sir," he said. "When you next see your honorable friend, Captain Sephard, you may say that I know him to be a cheat and a liar. And I do not believe that you think him an honorable man. Good night, sir. My thanks for your hospitality."

James bowed stiffly. He swept his hat and cloak from the table, stabbed his swordstick at the floor and strode quickly

toward the door. He turned to close it after he had gone through to the gallery, and the brief glimpse he had of d'Array was astonishing. James stared, unbelieving, then latched the door and groped his way down the dim staircase, frowning.

D'Array had been laughing! Leaning against the table, laughing silently, with the shine of helpless tears bright in his eyes!

James tapped his stick sharply against the side of the chaise to rouse the sleepy stableboy. He climbed in without waiting for the step and directed the boy back to the Queen's Head.

The moon was brighter now, clear enough to reveal the jagged line of rooftops with their polished lightning rods outlined against the darkness. James reached in his pocket and touched the crisp oblong of Uncle Ruthven's second letter. Because of that letter his reception at Braeburn tomorrow was assured. Miss Luisa, and the man posing as his Uncle Douglas, would be forced to see him again. And that would be his last chance for success. Everything hung on tomorrow's interview.

Suddenly James felt hopeful, full of confidence. The New York branch of Coult and Company clearly had some guilty connection with the illicit Statia trade. The rumors had already reached London. Miss Luisa must have been terrified to hear that Count d'Array intended to expose all merchants engaged in that trade. And think how much more terrified she would be to read Uncle Ruthven's second letter.

James now had the lever he needed to force the sale. Success was in his grasp. He could almost see Uncle Ruthven smiling at him and murmuring something casually admiring about the Coult instinct for trading.

And he could clearly see also the open contempt, the clear bright hatred in Miss Luisa's eyes.

She lived in a world of cheats, but it was hard for James to believe she was not herself honest. She had lied to him often, yet James was always inclined to believe her. That was stupid, ruinous folly, James warned himself. He said that often and persuasively in his mind and by the time the chaise rumbled into the Queen's Head yard, he had almost convinced himself. Almost.

◀ CHAPTER 13 ▶

A HARSH CLATTER in his room brought James awake with a start. He shielded his eyes against the strong warm sunlight and peered sleepily toward the fireplace where a red-faced, apprehensive Crutchfield was kneeling, looking back over his shoulder, hands scrabbling for a load of split logs that had crashed to the floor.

"Sorry," Crutchfield muttered. "Condemned wood just slid right out of my fingers." He rocked back on his heels and glared righteously at James. "Anyway, it's time you were up and doing. It's gone eight o'clock of a fine morning."

"Shut your impudent mouth," James growled. He pushed the bedclothes back and swung his feet to the floor, groping for his slippers. Crutchfield scrambled to his feet and held out his heavy quilted dressing gown. James waved it away.

"It's too warm a day for that," he said, smothering a yawn. He took the small silver cup that Crutchfield held out and turned it aimlessly in his fingers, stroking along the gadrooned rim and rubbing the faintly incised stallion's head that had nearly been worn away with long years of use. Crutchfield pulled the cork from a flat earthen jug and spilled a generous measure of whiskey into the cup. James drew in a long breath, holding the cup aside, then drank the raw, peat-tasting spirit in a swift gulp. A barbarous Scottish custom, James realized, but he could not stomach the rum or brandy which most gentlemen preferred as a morning tipple, and to start a day without a revivifying dram was, of course, unthinkable.

James tossed the empty cup to Crutchfield and rose, stretching wide with a sudden access of good spirits. "Bring me my tea now and lay out—"

Crutchfield snorted. "Tea!" he echoed, in a tone of infinite disgust. "Tea! In New York? Now where would I get tea?"

"Get it from the kitchen, you fool, and make sure it's hot." James rubbed his eyes and blinked to bring Crutchfield into focus. "What's got into you?"

"Answer a fool according to his folly," Crutchfield intoned. "This is New York. People here don't drink tea, not no more. There's some cheap Dutch Bohea around some-

times, but not much. A landlord what served tea in this town would soon find himself burned out, like as not."

"Nonsense," James said briskly. "There must be plenty of decent India left in my baggage. Dig it out and look sharp about it. I'll have a word with the landlord later on."

"Take me an hour to find it," Crutchfield complained. "Best take coffee instead?"

"Anything, anything," James said wearily. "Just take your smirking face away and fetch me something for breakfast before I—"

Crutchfield sidled toward the door. He looked back and just before he slipped out to the hallway, said in a low, forgiving tone, "I shall hide myself as it were for a little moment until the indignation be overpast."

"Oh, my God," James groaned. He moved unsteadily to the washstand, dipped both hands in a jug and sloshed cold water on his face. He walked toward the window while he towelled himself, and looked out at the harsh, almost glaring brightness of the street. The season had turned with surprising thoroughness. The morning was warm and slightly moist, like a fine spring day in London. The steady breeze was soft, almost balmy and James felt quite comfortable in his thin silk nightshirt that billowed behind him like a sail. Not a morning for business, he thought lazily. A drive through the countryside behind a pair of fast horses, or a drowsy voyage by barge with a pretty girl and a crew of pinchbeck musicians playing soft, lilting tunes, something of the sort was called for today. Every open green in London would be swarming with bowlers and cricket teams on a morning like this, and most Scotsmen would search out an old golf club and find a secluded place to flail away at a leathern ball. A glorious day. But not for James.

All good feeling left him swiftly when he remembered his mission. At three o'clock this afternoon he would go again to Braeburn and when he left he would have purchased Uncle Douglas' share of Coult and Company's New York branch. That would be success, complete and unquestionable. Why then did he dread the interview with Miss Luisa that lay ahead?

Crutchfield made a resounding noise on the narrow staircase. He entered the room backwards, holding a loaded tray cautiously in both hands. He slid it safely onto the table and whipped off the covering napkin. He poured equal amounts of coffee and boiled milk into a cup and offered it to James.

While James sat on the window sill, drinking his coffee, Crutchfield busied himself at the table. He uncovered a vast

platter and poised a fork over it. "Ham, cheese, cold mutton? Dish of oyster soup first, maybe? The girl's bringing up a pretty pair of beef chops in a minute. With some hot pease pudding and a dish of potatoes in cream. What's your fancy?"

"Nothing yet," James said in a glum tone. "I'm not hungry. Did you bring the shaving water?"

"Girl's going to fetch it," Crutchfield said. He laid knife and fork on the table and eyed James tightly. "Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth." Crutchfield came across the room and settled himself on the edge of the bed near James. "But there's no cheer in you, lad," he said quietly. "What's fretting at you?"

"Nothing you can help with, Crutchfield."

"I'd not be so sure, were I you. I fetched up with Wullie Caldune at the Liberty Boys meeting last night. A loose, blathering mouth, has Wullie. It's yon Captain Sephard that troubles you, is it?"

"Among others," James admitted. He handed Crutchfield his empty cup and gestured toward the cupboard. "Lay out my new French suit. I'll be calling on Captain Sephard this morning and if things go as I fear they will, I may have to fight him. We'd best make sure he doesn't outshine me on the field."

"He is a fair macaroni, for a provincial," Crutchfield said, not moving. "A fair swordsman, too, by all accounts." He rattled the cup in its saucer, staring down at it thoughtfully. "The Liberty Boys don't quite trust him."

"Neither do I," James said. "Now, get out my—"

"Softly, softly," Crutchfield murmured. "It'll do no harm to listen a wee moment. You've been a busy lad and maybe you'll not have seen that this city is a-boil with anger. A man might think they'd all come down with a weird fever that sets their brains on fire. A building was burned down last night, and two men were dipped in tar and plastered with feathers like great waddling birds. Tories, they were. King's men."

"I'm not concerned with provincial politics," James said. "I don't—"

"And this is the quiet city," Crutchfield went on, ignoring James. "In Boston and Philadelphia, the people are forever saying that New York is a Tory haven, full of bootlickers and cowards. What I saw and heard last night cooled my blood, I can tell you, and I was at Prestonpans with the Prince. If New York is a quiet, law-loving town, can you imagine what the rest of the colonies must be like?"

"I could imagine," James said, "but I won't try. My business here will be concluded soon. I have no right to interfere in colonial affairs. My opinion would be meaningless."

"You're no King's man, laddie?" Crutchfield's voice was quiet, contemplative.

"I'm nobody's man," James said bluntly. "If I lived here, I'd probably be as rabid as your friends. But I don't live here and I have other business to settle."

"I asked because I wanted to make sure you had not changed." Crutchfield rubbed his chin slowly. "I'm thinking I might leave your service when you go back to London."

"Why? What's happened, man?" James swung around to look at Crutchfield. That dour, erratic, cantankerous fellow had become almost a part of him. To Crutchfield he could speak as to no one else, even Uncle Ruthven. He could probably manage without him, but the prospect of losing his company was not a pleasant one. "What's in your mind?"

Crutchfield shrugged, as if suddenly wary of saying too much. "A thought," he muttered. "Let thy words be few, the Book tells us. I'll not speak more of it just now."

"You're not thinking of joining the Liberty Boys and going off to shoot a redcoat, are you? Didn't you have enough of that thirty years ago?"

"It is always a pleasure." Crutchfield beamed. "Ever fresh and ever new. But no, lad, I am thinking more of what will come to this land soon. There is a breath of wind here that I've not smelled since the '45. I'm thinking there may be a place for me here."

"And I'm thinking—" James began hotly. He choked back his angry words when a timid hand tapped at the door and pushed it open without waiting for his summons. A round-faced dumpling of a girl with reddened eyes and a quivering, uncertain mouth edged through and dropped in a clumsy, flustered curtsy at the sight of him. She held a steaming water jug in one hand, a covered dish in the other. Her eyes flickered half-frightened, toward Crutchfield.

"Just put them on the table and be off with you, lass. His Honor is in a fearful mood this morning." Crutchfield draped his arm across the girl's shoulders and led her back to the door. He patted her just once. The girl wailed in a high thin shriek. She turned to throw herself at Crutchfield, her head buried against his shoulder, her full buxom body pressed tightly against him. Crutchfield glanced at James despairingly over her head.

"There, there," he said clumsily. "Tears won't help young Richard, my lass. Steady up, now. Show me that pretty smile. We'll get him out, never you fear."

James stood staring and silent as Crutchfield eased the girl out the door. Then the girl drew herself erect, snuffled mournfully and whispered something to Crutchfield. She turned to James, keeping her face turned away as she wiped at the tears that streamed down her cheeks. "For-forgive me, Your Honor," she said hesitantly. "I am bade to say that a fellow named Wullie Caldune wishes to see you."

"And so you have said it, lass, and said it far more sweetly than the rascal deserves," Crutchfield said in a soothing tone. "Tell him he may come up in—" he glanced over his shoulder, waited until James nodded, then continued, "in half an hour. No sooner. Now take yourself down to the kitchen and have a stiff dram of grog. His Honor is standing treat." He patted the girl again, diffidently, nudging her until he could close the door behind her.

"What an old rogue you are," James said. "One glimpse of you and all the pretty girls break into scalding tears."

"It ain't me she's weeping for," Crutchfield said, stiff with affront. "She has a brother what's been taken away to gaol."

"Pity," James said. "What was he—"

"Young Richard assaulted a British soldier what had his sister down on her back in the tavern yard, skirts up over her head. Richard broke a dung-fork on the blackguard's head, but someone saw him and now he's for it. Five years, most likely, when the Lobsterbacks get through telling their lies."

"That's monstrous! Are you sure he—"

"Ah, laddie, it's no rare thing these days," Crutchfield growled. "The Sassenach is behaving here the way he did in the Highlands. They're pushing the people to fight, I tell you. But don't worry about young Richard. He has friends. The Liberty Boys won't let him suffer for long."

"I hope you're right," James said soberly. "If you and your friends need any help from me—" He let the rest go unmentioned, strangely touched when Crutchfield merely nodded casually, as if James' help had been taken for granted. He bent to lift the lid from a dish of grilled beef chops. He sniffed the aromatic steam and murmured in pleasure. He settled himself in the chair and slid the chops onto his plate. "More coffee, Crutchfield. And a little less nonsense about running off with the rebels. A man of your years should be making his peace, planning for a tranquil period to repent his sins."

"There's no man living would speak to me so," Crutchfield said darkly. "You presume on your position, lad."

"And so do you, you rogue," James said amiably. Struck with a sudden hunger, he wolfed down the chops, drained his

cup again and motioned toward the covered jug the girl had fetched. "Come shave me now and try not to cut my throat."

Crutchfield snorted heavily. He muttered in little spurts of injured dignity as he worked up a lather and brushed it into James' beard, but he would not stoop to speak clearly. He stropped one of his razors with a full arm motion and tested it briefly along his bare wrist before bending to James. At the touch of the blade James opened one eye and fixed it on Crutchfield's dour, glowering face in a comic pretense at fright. And as always happened, Crutchfield straightened quickly, stepped back and turned away. It took him a moment to regain his composure and when he returned to his work, he was not able to hold his mouth straight.

"Aye, you make it seem funny," he said balefully, "but it's God's own anointed truth I'm speaking."

James merely grunted. With the razor so near his mouth he did not dare to talk.

"I'm man enough for this town, as I was man enough for the Prince," Crutchfield said with his tongue gripped between his teeth to help him guide the razor more smoothly. "Man enough for the girls and more than man enough for any red-coated bruiser." He moved back to wipe his razor. He fixed James with a hard glare. "And what do you say to that?"

"Have you finished shaving me?"

"Not yet."

"Then I agree," James grinned. "I may change my mind after you've finished."

Crutchfield grumbled under his breath. He stroked the blade deftly along James' jawline and then wiped the excess lather away with a towel. He put his razor aside and draped the towel loosely around James' neck. He pushed a shallow silver bowl into place just under James' nose and then went around to untie his hair ribbon and brush his long hair forward over his face. With thin hard fingers Crutchfield worked pomade into the hair, digging with savage thrusts. Then he dredged scented white powder from a silver canister and brushed it in carefully. He drew James' hair back into place smoothly with a wide-toothed ivory comb, powdering it again, section by section. Finally he braided the ends into a tight queue and secured it with a black swallowtail silk ribbon. He inspected his work, nodded with satisfaction, and finished by dusting the excess powder from James' forehead with a soft brush.

James pulled his long stockings up to his thigh, gartered them and stepped into the tight breeches Crutchfield held for him. With the breeches loosely in position, Crutchfield tossed

a ruffled shirt over James' head and pulled it down. When the shirt was tucked in, Crutchfield turned James so he could cinch the waistband of his breeches. James folded his lace-edged silk cravat and slipped it around his neck. He backed into the long waistcoat Crutchfield was holding and tied his cravat in a soft, billowing knot while Crutchfield buttoned the waistcoat. James stepped into low shoes and stood still while Crutchfield locked the gold buckles snugly. He shook his head when Crutchfield took his coat from the cupboard.

"I'll wait a moment for that," he said, touching his moist forehead. "It's going to be a warm day."

"The heavens declare the glory of God," Crutchfield intoned sourly.

"I didn't realize glory was so hot," James said. "Now, what does your friend Caldune want to see me about?"

"No friend of mine," Crutchfield insisted. "I won't deny I've joined hands with him now and again when he had something clever fixed for Epsom or Newmarket. But that don't make us friends. Wullie's got a twist in his head. He likes to steal. He doesn't do it just for the money. He likes it." Crutchfield glared at James. "Not like me," he said in a challenging note of strict virtue.

"Indeed not," James agreed blandly. "You would never sell a horse for ten times his worth, or take a profit from a dishonest race, or even—"

"Such things I have learned from the gentlemen who employ me," Crutchfield said easily. "I couldn't say—"

He was silenced by a loud, peremptory knock at the door. He frowned heavily as he stamped across the room and pulled the latch. He stood blocking the entrance angrily.

"You'll rap at a gentleman's door properly, my lad, or you'll find me rapping on your thick skull. Now come in decently, wipe your filthy boots and mind your manners. Off with the cap."

Caldune stared unbelieving at Crutchfield for a moment, then grinned slyly, displaying twisted yellow teeth in a conspiratorial grimace. "Whatever you say, Callum," he mumbled. He pulled a greasy knitted cap from his head and bowed clumsily. "Pardon, Your Honor, didn't mean to make a clatter."

"Out with it, lad. Out with it," Crutchfield demanded sharply. "What's brought you here, taking up Mr. Coult's time with your blathering?"

"'Tis a private matter, sir," Caldune said to James. "And I'd be eternally grateful for a moment in private. Alone, that is to say. Just you and me."

Crutchfield lifted to his toes angrily. His thin mouth tightened and opened to roar. But James spoke before Crutchfield could take his breath.

"Nonsense," he said easily. "Crutchfield can hold his tongue when he chooses. As you should know."

"Aye," Caldune muttered. "I know Callum well, I do. But I canna speak but to—"

"As you wish," James said shortly. "Please get my coat, Crutchfield, and—"

"We-ell," Caldune said slowly. "Maybe I just might—"

"I'll give you one minute," James said. He sat on the window sill where the sun warmed his back, and folded his arms.

"I have to be careful, Mr. Coult," Wullie Caldune said in a low, persuasive voice. He glanced at Crutchfield and managed a faint smile. "I know Callum Crutchfield well, sir, and I know you by repute. I can trust you both, and trust you I will. But I still have to be careful. I came here to New York because I'm a careful man, and now I'm thinking it's time I left, because I'm careful. I can't afford not to be careful."

"Very well," James said patiently. "I'll accept that as proven. You're a careful man. What of it?"

"New York is no place for a careful man these days, Mr. Coult," Caldune said softly. "It's dark and full of blood and strange doings."

"I dare say. Come to the point, man, if you have one."

Caldune smirked confidently. "I have a point, Mr. Coult. Never fear. Wullie Caldune was never a man to waste time. I've been Captain Sephard's jockey for almost a year. And sometimes I've been something more than a jockey."

"Have you now?" James muttered.

"Aye," Caldune said with a forceful nod. "More'n once I've taken a hand on a little voyage, a quiet little voyage, you might say, with Captain Sephard. And sometimes I've helped in the warehouses, unloading or loading, as the case might be." He spread his feet wide, hooked his thumbs in a wide leather belt and smiled at James. A jaunty, cock-sparrow of a man, sly, over-confident, and more than a little treacherous, James thought.

"Why do you tell me?" he asked calmly. "Do you expect me to be interested in Captain Sephard's smuggling? To pay you for information, perhaps?"

Crutchfield growled and James silenced him with a warning glare. Caldune balanced lithely in his small horseman's boots. His smile lost none of its sureness.

"Where and who and what," he said quietly. "Maybe that'd be worth something, Mr. Coult? If I could afford to, I'd

make you a present of the information, because you're a fine generous gentleman, a real sporting gentleman. But I have to think of the future. A careful man can't—"

"Where and who and what," James repeated slowly. "Statia, Mr. Gerardus Bols, unlicensed munitions. Is that the information you came to sell me?"

Caldune's eyes widened. He stared at James with a growing awe. Then he lifted his gaze to look out the sunlighted window. "I'm getting to be an old man," he said in a dreaming tone. "When Callum and me was boys, we thought we'd be young forever. But it ain't so, as you'll find out, Mr. Coult. A man gets to feeling old and he doesn't think as sharp as he ought. He forgets other people can be clever, too. I made a mistake about you, Mr. Coult. And I think maybe Captain Sephard made a bigger mistake."

"What are you trying to tell me?" James demanded.

Caldune brought his eyes down to James' face and he smiled again, this time with no suggestion of a smirk, merely a quiet, contemplative smile as if he enjoyed his thoughts. "Captain Sephard sent a footman to find me last night," he said softly. "Came into the Liberty Boys meeting, he did, all brave in blue-and-yellow livery. He took me to where Captain Sephard was waiting in his carriage. He was very nice, the Captain was. He said he understood how it was that Dragonfly came to run away with me yesterday and he was sorry he'd slashed me. Just a fit of temper that he regretted. He wanted me to come back to his service."

James nodded encouragement as the little man stopped talking and directed his bland, conciliatory smile at the window again.

"He wanted to make sure I wouldn't go talking to anybody about his business," Caldune went on. "I knew what he wanted, right enough. And I was willing, in a manner of speaking. But I knew it was you he was worried about and so I decided I'd just come and see for myself if you were likely to upset the Captain's plans. Now I have seen you, I don't think I'll go back to the Captain's service. I'm a careful man, Mr. Coult. I can't afford any more mistakes. Maybe Captain Sephard can, but not Wullie Caldune. I'm thinking I'll take passage on the West Indies packet this afternoon and see if my luck won't change down in the sugar islands."

"But what made you change your mind, man? Are you saying that your real purpose in coming here was to get information? Is that it?"

"Aye," Caldune said easily. "Aye, I came to get it, Mr. Coult. I had to know before I could make up my mind. If I'd found out that you didn't know anything and didn't want to

find out anything, then maybe I might have decided to go back with Captain Sephard. Lots of money around the Captain, if you're a clever man. But I've talked to you now, Mr. Coult, and I don't think it's going to be safe around Captain Sephard any longer. Not for any man that tries to be careful. You're looking at the Captain now and anybody what looks at him hard is going to see what's there to be seen. No, sir. Wullie Caldune is a careful man, and it's the sugar islands for me."

He buttoned his thin coat across his narrow chest with a decisive air and twiddled his cap in both hands.

"Were you surprised to hear that I knew about the Statia trade?" James asked abruptly, arresting Caldune as he started for the door.

"Yes, sir, I was surprised. But not as surprised as Captain Sephard is going to be."

"Then Captain Sephard actually is engaged in illicit trade with the Dutch at Statia? Captain Sephard himself? He is bringing illegal munitions into the colonies?"

James watched the faint trace of a smile wash away from Caldune's sly face. The little horseman looked up at him with a shocked expression.

"You didn't know!" he almost whispered. "My God, you didn't know at all! And here I've gone and—"

Crutchfield's shriek of wild, triumphant laughter brought a blazing flush of fury to Caldune's face, and James spoke quickly to soothe him.

"You've given away your information, Caldune, instead of selling it, but I'll see you don't lose by it. I should say it was probably worth a hundred pounds to me to be sure that Captain Sephard does not learn you have given away his secret." James cocked an eyebrow and waited.

Caldune nodded suddenly, decisively. "You could send Callum with me," he suggested with a wink. "He could stay till I'm on board the packet and give me the money when there's no chance of me getting off before it sails. Would that do, sir?"

"That's agreeable," James said. "I was interested to hear that you were at the Sons of Liberty meeting last night. You had a torchlight parade, I believe, and a certain amount of—high-spirited jollity in the streets, Crutchfield tells me. Did you happen to notice the rifleman who was shooting somewhere around the City Arms Tavern? A bit after your meeting dispersed last night?"

Caldune pursed his lips with sly consideration. Slowly, reluctantly, he shook his head. "I don't reckon I've ever seen

a rifle in my life, sir. Nor a rifleman neither. Not to know him."

"Let me be more clear," James said patiently. "Do you know anything at all about anyone at all who was firing any sort of weapon last night?"

"I never heard nothing, sir," Caldune insisted. "That's the gospel truth, sir. I was with Callum Crutchfield every minute after we broke up the meeting. God is my witness."

James looked at Crutchfield. After a slow moment's consideration, the man nodded.

"Crutchfield is your witness," James said. "And you'd best be thankful for that. Very well, Caldune. Now then, Crutchfield, jump downstairs and fetch my desk from the landlord's strongbox. Do you think you can tear yourself away from your rebel friends long enough to see Caldune safely off on his ship?"

"Aye," Crutchfield said sourly. "But I see no need for giving him a good hundred pounds for his villainy. Great God, lad, you gave him two hundred and fifty guineas yesterday. Let me give him a—"

"That's enough," James said flatly. "Have you anything else to tell me, Caldune?"

"No, sir," Caldune said promptly with a sharp movement of his head. "I couldn't tell you anything you'll need to know, Mr. Coult. We've had our little talk and I'm thinking you'll need no man's help. If I had any friendly regard for Captain Sephard, it's him I'd be worrying about now."

Wullie Caldune smiled and his impish, rascal's face brightened with the beatific expression of a man who has been dazzled by splendor. "I'd be feeling sorry for Captain Sephard," he said softly.

◀ CHAPTER 14 ▶

JAMES WAITED in the hallway of the Queen's Head, forcing himself to calmness, keeping a watchful eye on Wullie Caldune who fidgeted nervously near the door, turning his greasy cap round and round in his hands, casting quick, apprehensive glances out the thick glass panes, as if he were frightened that Captain Sephard might send someone to seize

him before he would get safely away on the West Indies packet. Possibly Caldune had good reason to fear his former master but it seemed to James that his timidity was overdone.

The rascal—the “careful” rascal—might feel easier in his mind if he had known that James intended to challenge Captain Sephard a few minutes later. Sephard would have no thought to spare for Wullie Caldune today. But quieting Caldune’s fears was not a matter that interested James. A few hours of quaking would not harm that sly little scoundrel.

Crutchfield appeared through the Long Room door, bearing James’ locked travelling desk. It took only a moment for him to open it, count out twenty five-pound notes and give the money into Crutchfield’s keeping. Then Crutchfield ran back with the desk to see it safely stored again. James was compelled to suffer Caldune’s fulsome spate of gratitude until a glowering, disapproving Crutchfield returned and cut the little man off by dragging him roughly out to the street.

James paused to inspect his cravat in the polished steel disc hung beside the door. He settled his glossy new beaver squarely on his head, low across his eyebrows, and brushed his lace cuffs back up over his sleeves. Methodically he searched his pockets, making sure of watch, keys, purse, snuffbox, handkerchief and the letter from Uncle Ruthven that was to be delivered at Braeburn that afternoon. He was dressed rather ceremoniously for a morning in the provinces. His watered silk coat was the rich tone of Jersey cream and the gold brocade of his waistcoat was dazzling. Altogether, his clothes were more suitable for *levée*, but years ago James had discovered the small but sharp benefit to his interior confidence that came with extravagantly fine clothes. Today he meant to confront Captain Sephard, to fight him unless the blackguard offered a public apology and explanation. Any meager advantage would be helpful to James, for he was no duellist. He had attended classes in swordplay in the various *salles d’armes* of London, as did all the fashionable young gentlemen, but he had never before found himself in a position where a duel was absolutely unavoidable. And now that he was in such a position, he was mildly pleased and surprised to feel no excessive nervousness or apprehension. James pulled the door open and strode out into the bright sunlight, reminding himself to walk slowly and deliberately.

The wide cobbled expanse of Broad Street was active with mid-morning movement of brisk city matrons abroad on housewifely errands, followed by servants with bags and baskets. Heavy drays lumbered toward cross streets and so to the docks. Surely much if not all of the visible commerce

was illegal, James suspected, but neither customs men nor soldiers seemed interested in stopping it. At the foot of Broad Street a massed rank of carriages centered about the Royal Exchange, but the street was clear almost to the door of the Coult and Company counting-house.

One carriage drawn by a lightweight pair of sorrels stood there, blocking the narrow sidewalk so that James had to walk around it to reach the door. It was a green-and-gilt landau, freshly varnished, with its top folded down. An open carriage was rushing the season a trifle, James thought, but he could appreciate the temptation offered by such an unexpectedly fine morning. A coachman and his footman in matched green livery straightened on the box when they noticed James. The Coult livery, James noted.

He stopped with his thumb on the latch. He drew in a slow breath and squared his shoulders. "Coldness, my boy," Uncle Ruthven had always recommended. "Never show an enemy the least sign of human feeling. A mountainous calm, an icy frigidity, but never heat or passion. Let the other man lose his head. Then it will be easy for you to manage him." James pushed down the latch and went inside.

The bent-backed chief clerk glanced up suspiciously at the sound of the door. He wiped his pen on the sleeve of his rusty black coat and waited until James was in full view before he moved. Then his mouth dropped slightly and he scrambled down from his high stool.

"Don't trouble," James said. "I know the way."

"But, sir! Mr. Coult, I must—"

"You'll stay here," James said flatly. "I'll speak to Captain Sephard alone." He shouldered past the clerk and went down the dim musty corridor that led to Sephard's ornate room. Behind him the clerk bleated a protest, but he did not follow.

James shoved Sephard's door open with the tip of his stick, driving it back hard against the wall.

"Sephard," he said in a harsh tone, "I want—"

His voice dwindled slowly to silence as the slim form of the girl rose, regally tall, outlined against the bright windows. A soft breeze fluttered the wide lawn sleeve of her gown and James caught a vagrant whiff of scent.

"Forgive me, Miss Luisa," he said stiffly, almost offended to find her standing in Sephard's place. "I seek Captain Sephard."

"A pity," the girl said with a hint of mockery. "You have missed him by only a few minutes. He was called away."

"Where and when may I find him?" James asked tightly. "You understand, Miss Luisa, why I must."

With the light behind her, Miss Luisa's face was indistinct, capped by a misty halo made by the sun in her hair. He could not be sure, but James thought she was smiling.

"So bloodthirsty," she said lightly, "and on such a beautiful morning."

"Is Captain Sephard trying to avoid me?" James demanded.

Miss Luisa laughed. "If you knew Captain Sephard's reputation, you would never suggest the possibility."

"I know all I wish to know of Captain Sephard," James said. "And I—"

"Please, Mr. Coult," the girl said softly. "Less heat, sir. We haven't behaved well toward you, I'm afraid. You may feel you have been ill-used. Surely you must have expected a warmer, more friendly welcome. I hope you will forgive us. My—my father spoke very strongly about you when I returned last night. He has commanded me to ask your pardon."

James removed his hat with slow care, making his expression bland and empty. Her father, he thought savagely, that inept old impostor! Dear God, they must all think me stupid beyond reason!

"Thank you," he said quietly. Then, a rising curiosity overcoming his normal caution, he asked, "But what of Captain Sephard? You know why I have come here this morning?"

"Yes," the girl said in a small, contrite voice. "That is my fault, too. I foolishly repeated something Captain Sephard said in my presence, and I did not repeat it correctly. There was a moment of—some heat between us, Mr. Coult. I went too far. Captain Sephard did not say the things I told you. So there is no need to challenge him."

Very neatly done, James considered. Such a mild, almost absent-minded retraction from Miss Luisa had to be accepted, of course. Though if he had been able to reach Captain Sephard first, he would never have listened to any form of apology.

"Please, Mr. Coult," the girl said urgently when James' silence had grown oppressive. "Please put aside all thought of insult. I—I misunderstood so many things yesterday. I am still bewildered, but I can see now how wrong I was to think that you would have anything to do with—with—"

"With what?"

"With all those criminal activities Mr. d'Array was talking about last night."

"It's very good of you to say so," James said clumsily.

"Please don't be stiff, Mr. Coult. I am genuinely sorry for doubting you. Won't you let me try to make amends?"

James drew in a slow, steadying breath and managed to

smile. She didn't merely think him stupid, she thought he was insane. But he kept from his voice any hint of the suspicion he felt.

"I cannot be less generous, Miss Luisa."

"I'm so glad," she said happily. "My—my father is looking forward to seeing you again this afternoon. I think he would like to reconsider his answer of last night. The weight of affairs has been very trying for him lately. I would not be at all surprised if he accepted. But business will wait until this afternoon. Have you any plans for the day, Mr. Coult?"

"Not now, Miss Luisa."

"Then possibly you will let me show you something of New York? It would be a mortal pity to travel so far and see nothing of our island. Totten and Crossfield have sent my boat up from the shipyard. It's waiting for me at Whitehall Slip now. Would you care to sail up toward the Sound, Mr. Coult? I can promise you a magnificent view."

"A charming prospect," James said politely. And what would Sephard be doing while the girl kept him out of the way? he wondered. No matter. Possibly Sephard merely wished to avoid James until the girl had soothed his ruffled dignity. And possibly he was up to some rascally trick. But Sephard would be dismissed that moment James bought the New York branch this afternoon. He couldn't do much harm in that short time.

"Then you'll come?" Miss Luisa turned so that the sunlight touched her face, and her smile was beguiling. "So that I will know you have forgiven me?"

"Of course," James said ambiguously. He felt mildly suspicious, but as long as he was with the girl, there would be no danger, he felt. It seemed obvious to James now that Miss Luisa was a willing partner with Sephard, and that worried him, though he was forced to concede that it was no affair of his. "I would be delighted," he said. "What sort of boat do you have, Miss Luisa?"

The girl swept a filmy length of silk about her shoulders and took James' arm as they moved into the dark corridor. "I think it was originally a ship's launch," she said. She stopped to let the old clerk open the door for her. "My father's sailing friends all laugh and say it's just a toy, but I love it. I could manage it quite well by myself, but father insists I must have a sailor with me." She glanced dubiously at James. "I don't suppose you'd care to be the crew, Mr. Coult? Do you know about sailboats?"

James had sailed small craft since childhood. But before he could say so, an edge of wariness hobbled his tongue. He

heard himself answer, "No, Miss Luisa, my experience has been largely with merchant ships, not small boats."

Why did I lie? James wondered. He followed the girl to the street and helped her into the waiting carriage. Surely there had been no need to lie about sailing? It made no sense, James realized, but the lie had come so readily he had not been able to stop it.

The coachman flicked his whip lightly and turned the perfectly matched team in a tight circle. Once out of the shadow of the building, the sun shone warmly and the leather cushions soon lost their chill. The breeze freshened and grew slightly cooler as they approached the waterfront. A splendid day for sailing, James thought.

The landau rolled down a cobbled berm and halfway out along a covered wharf. From the slip, the ferry for Staten Island was being worked out into the current by long, double-manned sweeps. To the left, pressed against the pilings by the current, was moored a bare-masted merchantman riding high and empty, deserted except for a drowsing anchor watch. Miss Luisa touched James' hand and directed his attention to the other side, but he could see nothing until they had climbed from the carriage and walked close to the dock railing. Then they were looking down at the deck of a compact, clean-lined little vessel. It was little more than twenty feet long, half-decked forward of the single mast, with an open cockpit aft. Fitted wooden lockers formed a semi-circular seat in the cockpit and were almost buried in striped cushions.

"Isn't she lovely? Her name is *Bonita*. Do you know what that means, Mr. Coult?"

"It sounds familiar," James said. "The name of a fish, isn't it?"

The girl laughed softly. "Yes, it is a fish. But it is also a word in Spanish. It means pretty girl."

"Very appropriate," James admitted with a slight smile. He braced a foot against the edge of the dock and looked down at a rope ladder that led down to the boat. "Can you manage that, Miss Luisa?"

"Yes, very easily. If you will help me?" The girl gave him a slim cool hand and James felt muscles move tautly under his fingers as she swung down to the ladder in a graceful swirl of motion. Halfway down she released his hand and finished by herself, timing the rhythm of the boat perfectly and stepping down to the deck as it lifted gently under her. James handed his stick to her and clambered down the swaying ladder.

The touch of his shoe to the deck seemed to send a signal

through the boat. The hatch in the decked-over cuddy was thrown back immediately and a bandanna-wrapped head poked into sight. A wide grin sparkled with a gleaming display of teeth that seemed too large for that large mouth, and a slender young Negro boy fell over himself getting onto the deck. He bowed to the girl and nodded shyly to James.

"Sail, missy?" he asked excitedly.

"Yes, Henry. We're going to show the island to Mr. Coult. Will you get the hamper from my carriage?" She perched lightly on the stern seat and laughed up at James. "I have brought along some refreshments. It will soon be midday and we couldn't go very far if we had to come back by then." When James lifted his eyebrows slightly, she laughed and shrugged in confusion. "Very well, Mr. Coult. I confess. Our voyage is no accident. I would have called for you at the Queen's Head if you hadn't come to my father's counting-house."

"I'm flattered," James said. "You seem determined to get me away from town."

"No," the girl said quickly. "I was determined to get you away from Captain Sephard until I had a chance to explain—and apologize. I was afraid you might challenge him."

"I intended to."

"I know." The girl seemed strangely hesitant, James thought. She was on the verge of saying something more, but when she began a curious wariness stopped her. Finally she said with a forced brightness, "Do you like my little boat, Mr. Coult?"

James smiled. "Very much," he said easily. He looked around with an admiring eye. New varnish coated the deck and spars like a film of gilt. The sheets and running gear were obviously new and the sail had that tawny smoothness that lasts only a few days. "You've had her freshly overhauled?"

"Yes, the old girl was growing shabby." Miss Luisa clamped the long curving tiller between her elbow and body and called to the boy. "Put the hamper away, Henry, and cast off the lines. Remember what I told you this morning. You stay forward and watch the jib. We don't want to ship any water or we'll spoil Mr. Coult's beautiful coat."

She smiled mischievously at James and gestured to the seat on the other side of the tiller. "Sit here, Mr. Coult, and maybe I'll let you steer when we're out in the river."

She and the boy handled the boat with a careless precision. The boy cast off the lines, bow and stern, and shoved the boat into the current. The main sail went up sweetly, with a whisper of rope through well-greased blocks. The

boy hauled the sheet taut and the boat began to answer the helm, heeling slightly. The wind was soft, little more than a breeze, but the sail filled and the boat drew steadily away from the shore.

Miss Luisa kept her attention focussed on the boat but she took time to glance briefly at James, smiling quizzically. "Can't you relax even now, Mr. Coult? Or are you afraid of boats?"

James looked at the girl. He hadn't realized that he was gripping the polished gunwale tightly with one hand while he clutched his hat with the other. He was sitting stiffly upright, stick locked between his knees, and he must have looked the very picture of queasy apprehension to the girl. She leaned comfortably back, letting her ribboned hair blow as it would, her chin lifted to the soft wind. The contrast between them must be ludicrous, James felt. In fact everything about his trip to New York so far had been either ludicrous or frightening. It was no wonder he seemed ill at ease.

"I'm not worried, Miss Luisa," he said, making his voice easy and casual. "I have every confidence in you."

The girl laughed softly. "I suspect a note of sarcasm, and I probably deserve it. But please make yourself comfortable, Mr. Coult, and talk to me. Tell me about London. I haven't seen it since I was a girl, and then only briefly. It must be very different now. Who is the King's current favorite? Do the fashionable people still go to Ranelagh Gardens and Drury Lane? And what about the rakehelly young gentlemen like the monks of the Hell Fire Club? Are they really the monsters they are said to be?"

The eager, foolish questions relaxed James as nothing else could have done. He laughed and the laughter came easily. He put aside his stick, removed his hat, and shifted until he was lounging almost at full length of the seat. He propped himself on one elbow so that he could see Miss Luisa outlined against the wide ribbon of bubbling wake that streamed behind them. And he chattered as pleasantly and aimlessly as she wished, imagining himself drifting along the slow upper reaches of the Isis with a boatload of pampered beauties who demanded flattery and entertainment. He spoke lightly and with some wit, and he was rewarded with quiet laughter. For James it was a lazy, placidly familiar exercise and after a while something hard and tight in his mind was eased. For the first time since coming to New York he stopped worrying and gave himself to the present. There in the sprawling city behind that line of ships and warehouses, half the people were planning rebellion and the

other half were quaking, frightened both of their King and their belligerent neighbors. And men like Bols and d'Array and Sephard were adding to the confusion for their own reasons. But James could now anticipate a successful end to his mission and he refused to think of anything else. Those warm morning hours on the river went by swiftly and happily for him.

◀ CHAPTER 15 ▶

ONCE PAST the shipyards that lay across from the Brookland Ferry landing, the little sailboat rounded Corlaer's Hook at the heel of Manhattan, veering slightly toward Wallabout Bay before coming about on the opposite tack. The long-legged, grinning Henry scrambled expertly, allowing Miss Luisa to control *Bonita's* progress with little effort.

The countryside seemed more open now, especially along the Long Island side where James could see little but bleak moor and rough, treeless marshland. The small farm holdings to the north of New York were rigidly pruned and fenced, oddly formal as seen from the river. It was still too early for plowing and the land was freshly green with new tender growth. Occasionally a wagon or carriage passed along the Post Road, even more rarely a small sailboat or fishing smack slid in or out of the numerous wide inlets that scored the shoreline.

"Bushwick Inlet," Miss Luisa pointed out with a casual wave. "Newtown Inlet. Kip's Bay. Turtle Bay, where we live, though you can't see anything from the river."

Beyond Turtle Bay the river narrowed and the swift current was broken by a series of narrow sand-and-scrub-pine islands. The longest, with an old white-painted manor house looming high, was Blackwell's, Miss Luisa said. *Bonita* made headway slowly in a series of short tacks against wind and current, keeping both Miss Luisa and the boy busy until the boat rounded the northern tip of a low-lying island and came to rest in the shelter of a small bay. *Bonita* rode in gentle motion, ladylike in the soft breeze. As the boat rounded to, the boy let go the halyards and downed sail. The boat retained way enough to carry her forward until the keel grounded lightly in the sand.

Miss Luisa released the tiller and flexed her hands quickly to ease cramped muscles. She brushed her hair back with a negligent gesture and glanced briefly at the tiny, deserted island, sweeping the brush-covered knoll of sand with a quick inspection.

"When I was a child we used to come here often," she said. "For a *pique-nique*, as the French call it. My mother loved to spread a carpet on that little hill and sit there watching the ships backing and filling, trying to get through the Hell Gate. In summer, it's lovely here. You don't think it's too chill, do you?"

"You may want a wrap, Miss Luisa," James said lightly. "But the sun seems strong on that hill. How does one get ashore without wading?"

"Henry helps me." Miss Luisa measured James solemnly. "But I don't think he could—"

"I'll manage," James said stiffly. He rose and steadied himself by gripping a backstay. Henry slipped bare-footed into the shallow water and tossed a light kedge-anchor to the sand. He came back, braced himself solidly, and held up both hands for the girl. Disembarking was neither new nor difficult for Miss Luisa. With that same sureness and ease she had shown with the rope ladder, she balanced herself lithely on the gunwale and leaped out with a long stride, using Henry's high-held hands as a pivoting center. Henry took two stumbling steps toward the shore and Miss Luisa swung lightly down to the dry sand and stood there grinning at James.

He bowed, applauding softly. Then he balanced on the railing and stepped out gigantically, grateful for the boosting push offered at just the right moment by Henry. He reached the shore almost without damage, save for one shoe that dipped briefly into the water. His foot squelched noisily with each step as he followed the girl up the slope to the peak of the knoll.

Miss Luisa surveyed the tiny island with a practised, approving eye. When Henry came up, panting under the weight of a heavy carpet and a great wicker hamper, she directed him with a firm certainty. The carpet was spread slightly downhill on the far side where the row of stubby bushes would break the wind that blew steadily. There in a round hollow where the sun beat strongly, the carpet was laid, Miss Luisa's ribboned parasol propped upright in the hard-packed sand. Henry dropped three cushions from the boat's supply, placed the hamper in the center of the carpet and unlatched the lid.

"Chill wine, missy?" he asked in that breathless, excited tone that seemed habitual with him.

"Oh, I don't think so, Henry." Miss Luisa sank in a graceful movement. She looked up at James and gestured to a cushion nearby. "Do be comfortable, Mr. Coult. Are you particularly insistent upon cool wine? Sometimes we have Henry dig a pit just below the waterline and put bottles there an hour or so to cool. But it is scarcely warm enough today, would you say?"

"By no means, Miss Luisa. I don't care for chilled wine in any event. Sadly bad for one's interior economy, I'm told, though many of the rakehelly young men you were asking about will have nothing else. Shall I open a bottle?"

"Please do. And, Henry, I don't like the feel of the tiller when it's held hard a-port. I can't understand why it should be so stiff. See what you can do with it after you've had something to eat. You needn't trouble about us any more. Mr. Coult and I have everything we need. We'll manage quite well for a few hours."

As he busied himself with corkscrew and bottle, James wondered at the striking difference between English and provincial ladies. From her easy manner and lack of embarrassment, it was clear that Miss Luisa felt she was behaving with an acceptable degree of modesty. But in England a proper young lady would never have permitted herself to be found alone with a male creature. It might happen in England, of course, but only to the accompaniment of giggles and sidelong glances and vaporish nonsense. This was far preferable, James thought. And he had a suspicion that at the first hint of impropriety, Henry would come charging over the knoll to rescue his mistress. A few hours alone with Miss Luisa on the sunny island should be wonderfully relaxing.

A few hours. Until then James had not thought about the time. Surely he couldn't hope to get to Braeburn by three o'clock if he spent several hours lounging on the island. When the cork came free with a sighing plop, James braced the open bottle with one hand while he took out his watch. As he had expected, it was nearly one o'clock. In two hours he was due at Braeburn and it might take him the best part of an hour to reach there even if Miss Luisa were to take him directly to Turtle Bay in her boat. He looked up in time to see the girl studying him with sober consideration.

James snapped his watch shut and put it away. He bent to the hamper quickly. A faint uneasiness wiped away his previ-

ous lighthearted contentment. He took two glasses from a protective napkin, filled one and offered it to the girl.

Miss Luisa took it readily. She nested one elbow against a deep cushion and half reclined on the carpet. A beam of sunlight found a prism in the stem of her glass and she lifted it slightly, turning it this way and that, smiling at the shifting, multi-hued glitter that danced along the edge of her skirt. James made a socket in the sand for the wine bottle and settled himself on the carpet.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to spend several hours here, Miss Luisa, delightful as it is. I hate the thought of leaving, but your father is expecting me at Braeburn by three o'clock this afternoon."

"No, Mr. Coult," the girl said with casual firmness. She looked at James over her glass and her full mouth moved in that secretly amused smile that James was coming to detest. "My—father is not expecting you at three. He is not expecting you at all."

James frowned. "Why do you say that?"

The girl almost laughed at him. "Because I told him you would not come. Neither to Braeburn nor anywhere, Mr. Coult. Not this afternoon. Later you will be free to go where you like. But don't come to Braeburn again. You will not be admitted."

James eyed her steadily, feeling his face go hard and stiff as he fought to control himself. "You intend to stop me if I wish to return? How?" He sipped at his wine experimentally, then drained his glass and set it down.

"No, I won't stop you, Mr. Coult. I don't need to do anything at all. You can't leave here until I take you."

"Indeed." She was very sure of herself, James could see. So she must have sent *Bonita* beyond his reach, he thought. James pushed himself erect and stalked up the slight rise to the brow of the knoll. *Bonita* was no longer anchored in the tiny bay. She rode free and light a hundred yards upstream from the island. As James watched, Henry came about, scudding back with the swift current, heeling as he swept close by the island, almost scraping sand with the keel. Henry kept the boat on that course until he neared a low-lying island to the south. Then he put the boat about again and began to beat back against the current. He lifted one hand in a jaunty, insolent wave to James.

Miss Luisa's voice was crisp and amused. "He will return when I call him, Mr. Coult. Not before."

James nodded. A painless and effective method of imprisonment. But why had the girl gone to so much trouble? He returned slowly and sat down.

Miss Luisa's coloring was heightened by her triumph and her eyes sparkled as she watched James. And again James was silently angered by the clumsiness of the tricks that were meant to deceive him. He didn't mind being marooned here half so much as he disliked knowing that Miss Luisa now expected him to be overwhelmed, surprised, defeated, incapable of effective action.

He could bring Henry back to the island any time he wished, and leave on *Bonita* whenever he was ready to leave. The solution was so obvious that James was hard put to conceal his irritation. But this might be an excellent opportunity for a talk with Miss Luisa. She would be feeling a little contemptuous of him now, James guessed, judging by the mocking curl of her mouth. On such a wave of self-approval she might speak freely and openly if he could direct the conversation cleverly enough. But first he would have to shake her firm composure, make her dubious rather than confident.

He filled his glass again and leaned over to lift the lid of the hamper. "Do you feed your prisoners well, Miss Luisa? What have we here? A pretty brace of grilled birds. And could this be celery? Now where on earth do you find celery so early in the season? Hothouses at Braeburn, I dare say?"

"You are very cool about everything, aren't you, Mr. Coult?" the girl said with an edge to her voice.

"There is no profit in vain repining, dear lady," James said, trying for that tone of weary languor that Uncle Ruthven used so effectively. "What are your plans for me?"

"We will return before the tide turns. Some time before six o'clock, that is."

"I see. And so we are to have five delightful hours alone together on this lovely island. What a charming prospect. Will you take some celery, Miss Luisa?"

The girl dashed the stalk of celery from his hand with a quick, impatient sweep. James was not behaving as she had expected. His cheerful acceptance of the situation was far more disturbing than the vain threats and wild complaints she was prepared to counter. She shifted, half turning from him.

"Excellent celery," James said pleasantly. He crunched noisily into a stalk. "At this time of year it would be a treat even in London. My compliments to your gardener."

The girl frowned uncertainly. "Is food all you care about?"

"No," James said easily. "I am concerned about many things. At the moment I am thinking of your—ah—father."

I don't suppose he actually did change his mind about Uncle Ruthven's offer? Your pretense that he had was just a little girlish deceit to induce me to come sailing with you this morning?"

"You are a fine one to speak of deceit!"

"He could merely have sent me a message," James said. "Why keep me marooned on a sandy island all day? Please understand, dear lady, that I am flattered to know you want to be alone with me, but I am really a modest fellow at heart and I cannot believe this pleasant interlude is entirely your idea."

"You may be sure that it wasn't," the girl said coldly. "You were brought here to keep you from interfering in affairs that don't concern you."

"I have been rather inquisitive, I know," James said with a mocking show of apology. He dabbled a napkin at his mouth and broke off a second stalk of celery. "But all of you have been behaving so curiously, it seems to me. One can hardly keep from speculating. I wonder whose affairs need concealment? Not yours, surely. Not—oh, of course. It could only be Captain Sephard. And what secret enterprise worries him today. Something to do with illicit munitions, I'll wager. Does he have a cargo arriving today? Or didn't he confide in you?"

"You are a fool," she said.

James shrugged. "Often," he said. "But not this time. It is a smuggled cargo that Sephard is trying to conceal from me, isn't it? What did he tell you the cargo was?"

"I know what it is," the girl insisted.

"You know what you were told," James pointed out casually. "And knowing Captain Sephard to be a liar, you will not believe him." James glanced at the girl. She was irritated and impatient, but she was still in control of herself. Until she lost that poise she would say nothing revealing. Languidly, James added, "the blowhard Captain Sephard. The cowardly cheat you plan to marry. How did he persuade you to protect him, dear lady?"

"Don't call me dear lady!" the girl snapped. "Captain Sephard doesn't need my protection, as you will learn."

"But I could have learned much sooner," James said in a tone of mild complaint. "I tried to find him this morning, you will recall, but the blackguard had run off somewhere, leaving you behind to divert me. I wonder where he will be hiding when I get back to town?"

"You will have no difficulty in finding him, sir. The sword blade in your ribs will be Captain Sephard's."

"From behind, of course," James suggested. "Yes, I would

recognize Sephard then. But you haven't answered me, dear lady. How did Sephard persuade you to kidnap me? It surely doesn't embarrass you to talk about your criminal activities?"

Miss Luisa's face flamed with quick anger. Her hands trembled when she brought them up to brush her hair back from her forehead. "You—you are free with your tongue, Mr. Coult. But only with unprotected females, I notice. You will answer for your insults, I promise you!"

"To whom, dear lady?" James asked softly. "What gentleman will you send to correct me? Not that cheat Sephard. He has already earned his fight. We needn't trouble a dead man further. Who will you send?"

"My—my—" Miss Luisa's mouth grew thin and taut, almost harsh with restraint as she silenced herself abruptly. Her eyes widened in sudden surmise.

James nodded soberly, pretending he misunderstood the girl's hesitancy. It wasn't yet time for him to let her know he was aware that an impostor had taken his uncle's place yesterday. James emptied his glass and filled it again.

"Of course," he said gently. "Uncle Douglas will come to correct me. Good. I will welcome an opportunity to talk to him about many things. I would like to ask him why he is willing to let his step-daughter marry a coward and a cheat. And possibly he can explain to me why his step-daughter kidnapped me today. And, too, there is the problem I came here originally to discuss with him. By all means have Uncle Douglas call upon me, dear lady."

"You are so very brave, alone with a defenseless woman," the girl said indignantly. "You take a contemptible advantage, sir."

"But I didn't ask to be brought here, nor to be left alone with you, dear lady." James drank his wine and balanced his glass against the side of the hamper. "All that is your doing, and you must accept the consequences. If you'd wanted protection, you should have brought it with you."

James smiled at the girl's speechless anger. He let himself fall easily to one side, propping himself on his elbow just beyond Miss Luisa's foot. He turned slowly and drew a finger casually along the pointed toe of her slipper.

"I will have a pleasant memory to take back to London with me," he murmured. "All the roaring bucks will be asking me for adventurous tales and now I will have this charming interlude to recount. Alone on a sunny, secluded island in the East River with the most beautiful and eager young lady in the province. An excellent bottle of wine, soft cushions on a pretty carpet. I'll be able to dine out on the story for weeks. There'll be no more trouble inducing young gentle-

men to come out to the colonies when I've told them of the entertainment that awaits them."

As he spoke James let his finger stroke lightly along the girl's slipper where it protruded from the hem of her full skirt. Without looking up he felt her stiffen with rigid alarm, as if for the first time she had become sharply aware of the dangerous loneliness of the island.

"You—you couldn't—" she said in a thin, choked tone.

James chuckled softly. His finger lifted higher to touch at the silken instep above the slipper. Miss Luisa's sudden shocked gasp was all that he could have hoped for.

"My dear girl," he said in a seducer's honied voice. "You mustn't struggle with me. I won't hurt you."

Her scream was a piercing delight to James, a full-throated shriek of outrage and terror that soared across the small island like a bugle call.

Miss Luisa drew in her feet quickly, trying to rise. But James rolled over, reaching forward to grip her silken ankle and hold her in place. Her screams grew to a deafening volume, but James continued to make soothing sounds, thinking that she might hear them for a brief moment when she was drawing in a panicked breath, and be set off again.

She had an ugly opinion of him, James knew, but he was genuinely surprised that she could believe him capable of rape. It was that unwarranted, insulting conviction of hers that gave unusual credibility to James' solution.

The shrieking girl pulled as far away as she could, thinking for the moment only of escape. One leg was exposed from the ankle James clutched to a slender knee where a fanciful blue rosette gartered the silk stocking. A pretty leg and well worth fighting for, James thought. The strong warm sun and the girl's frantic exertion seemed to make her light flowery perfume more noticeable and James turned his head quickly. Now it was his hands that trembled. This might go too far, James warned himself. He wanted her shrill frightened cries to toll Henry back to the island. But his pretended attack was only pretense. Wasn't it? The back of her calf fitted the palm of his hand warmly.

James compelled his mind back to his problem. He measured the dwindling intensity of the girl's screams and when the volume had dropped, he shifted his hand slightly, setting off another chain of breathless outcries.

The only difficulty was that James couldn't hear anything else. Miss Luisa was a strong, healthy young girl, delicately reared. Offered affront or indignity she was prepared to scream loud enough to rouse the dead and apparently, to keep it up all day. It was enough to freeze any man's ardor,

James thought. He kept his head low to the carpet, listening intently. His plan would have to succeed soon, if at all, he realized, because in a moment Miss Luisa would sense that he wasn't making a determined attack and then she would get over her initial fright and begin to defend herself. With tooth and nail probably, James thought. He wasn't prepared to face that.

He was beginning to lose hope when he heard the brief shrill whistle that meant success. Freshly rove untarred rope sang through the blocks as Henry brought *Bonita* into the bay and let go the sail.

James lunged to his feet, scrambling awkwardly up the sandy slope. Below, at the edge of the water, Henry was just placing the kedge anchor in the sand. He looked up wildly as James came hurtling down the slope at him. Disconcerted, Henry spun toward the boat, then remembered the long fowling piece in his hands and turned again, throwing the stock to his shoulder and trying to aim at the madman racing down the hill. James left his feet in a long desperate dive, using his strong momentum, reaching out for Henry. Henry squealed just once as James' head butted him solidly in the midriff. The unfired fowling piece flew over his head, spinning through the air and striking the boat's gunwale with a clattering thud. Henry collapsed in the shallow water.

James rose disgustedly. He brushed wet sand and silt from the front of his long elegant coat, surveyed the sodden mess that had been made of his fine waistcoat and breeches. He bent to slide one hand under the neckband of Henry's shirt and then dragged the boy up to the dry sand where he lay moaning rhythmically, holding himself with an exaggerated pretense of unbearable pain, and watching James with huge, terrified eyes.

"Get up, you rascal," James said impatiently. "Go help your mistress. Tell her I am taking *Bonita* back in five minutes, with her or without her, as she chooses."

"With her," Miss Luisa said sharply, close behind him. She watched James mopping his muddy face with his handkerchief and almost smiled before her furious sense of outrage made her frown. She spoke with a slow, deliberate emphasis. "You are too contemptibly clever for me. That was a blackguard's trick, but I don't suppose it will ever trouble you."

"Quite right," James agreed briskly. He was pleasantly surprised and elated at his success, but he knew it would never do to let Miss Luisa guess that. "A blackguard's trick, was it? And what is kidnapping, dear lady? You must expect a

few scars if you will play with fire. Henry, go up and collect the hamper and carpet and then sit down on top of the hill until I call you. I want to speak privately to your mistress."

"Henry, you will do nothing of the kind!" Miss Luisa said firmly. "I won't be left alone again with this—this—"

"Nonsense," James said impatiently. "I wouldn't dare touch you, dear lady. I couldn't endure those screams again. Henry, help your mistress to the boat. Now!"

The boy lurched to his feet. He waded into the shallow water, balanced himself, holding his hand for Miss Luisa. His blank, frozen stare never left James. After a taut, hesitant moment, Miss Luisa shrugged. She retreated a few steps, ran quickly toward the water, and with Henry's help, swung herself up to the boat's railing. James waded to the boat. As he passed Henry the boy moved aside, ducking his head and scuttling for the shore.

"Henry!" Miss Luisa called angrily.

"Let him go," James stepped down into the cockpit and kicked off his wet shoes. He propped one of the remaining cushions for a backrest and seated himself wearily. His head ached with a savage thump and his left thumb felt stiff and tender, as if it had been sprained, though he couldn't imagine how that might have happened. Even in the warm sunlight his damp clothes were clammy and uncomfortable, and he was conscious of looking like a scarecrow. All of that made his voice more harshly insistent as he spoke to the girl who stood balanced on the narrow railing, calling for Henry to return.

"Let him go," James said again. "Unless you want him to hear about that fat impostor you have been passing off as my Uncle Douglas."

◀ CHAPTER 16 ▶

MISS LUISA almost stumbled when she stepped down to the cockpit. She sat heavily, in the first ungraceful movement James had ever seen her make. She clutched at the bar of the tiller so tightly that tendons in her hands stood out in strong relief.

"What—what did you say?" she asked in a small, thin voice.

"Please don't fence with me, Miss Luisa. I have no patience left. As soon as I saw that old fool in Uncle Douglas' bed I knew he was a fraud. It was a ridiculous piece of trickery. Why did you try it?"

"But why—why didn't you—"

"I don't know," James said frankly. "I don't clearly understand it myself. Possibly I hoped to gain some advantage by keeping silent. It is more probable that I merely wanted to see what would happen next if I pretended to be duped. So far I have been slandered, threatened and kidnapped. What else do you have in mind for me, dear lady?"

"Don't call me that!"

"Be grateful I don't use a worse term, dear lady. Since the first moment we met you have lied and cheated at every turn. Why? You and your precious Captain Sephard are obviously involved in some stupid conspiracy, but by now even you must know it is doomed. If I don't manage to stop you, it is a certainty that Count d'Array will. Are you both so thick-headed you can't see that?"

"See what? Why do you—"

"Please don't plague me with protestations, dear lady," James said tightly. "From the beginning you have accused me of some sly sort of underhanded trickery. Why? I came here honestly and openly. My mission was important to the House of Coult, and extremely delicate, so quite naturally I would have preferred privacy. But someone broke into my travelling desk shortly after I called on Captain Sephard. I then came directly to Braeburn and as soon as I arrived you made it clear that you knew something of the instructions that had been locked in that desk. I won't ask you again who told you; we both know it was that wretch Sephard. Can you wonder that I was suspicious? Through a fortunate accident I was warned of Sephard's cheating horserace and managed to rub his nose in his own filth, but you would have been content to see him rob me, wouldn't you? And your clumsy attempt to make me think that silly impostor was my uncle gave me all the proof I needed to be sure that you were as much a cheat and liar as Sephard. I am sure you can justify all that you have done, but not to me. This fantastic little episode today is the finish for me. Would you like to know what I am going to do now?"

Miss Luisa merely stared at him silently with wide, shocked eyes. She did not move, though her stiff posture must have been painful and her hard grip on the tiller had already locked her fingers in unnoticed cramp.

"I was sent here to purchase your step-father's share of the New York branch. Uncle Ruthven authorized me to offer a fair price and to add fifty thousand pounds for good will. Well, I am going to buy the company, Miss Luisa, for its fair price and not one penny more. There is no good will to sell. Either my offer is accepted at once or I will present formal charges against Mr. Douglas Coult and Captain Isaac Sephard and see them imprisoned for smuggling. And if Captain Sephard actually is trafficking in illicit munitions, as I suspect, he will probably be hanged for sedition. If you have taken any active part in this business, I suppose you will join Uncle Douglas, though you will probably be let off with a lighter sentence."

"I—I don't believe you," the girl said bluntly. "I don't believe you could do such a thing. Not even you."

"You should believe me, dear lady," James said soberly. "I mean every word I say. You have been so busy inventing your asinine little schemes that you haven't once stopped to consider that I might mean what I say. I explained to you and that fat fraud who pretended to be your step-father why it is that Uncle Ruthven intends to buy you out. Obviously you didn't believe me. But try to believe me now, dear lady, and spare yourself further difficulty. It was Uncle Ruthven's hope that I could induce you to sell before the House of Coult was embarrassed by the criminal folly of the New York branch. I am almost convinced it is already too late, but if your step-father or Sephard can assure me that I still have a chance to fulfill Uncle Ruthven's mission, I am willing to buy the company, and hold my tongue. If you think they can persuade me, Miss Luisa, I urgently recommend that you tell them to try. Otherwise it is prison for Sephard and your step-father."

"You must be mad." Miss Luisa pulled her hands free of the tiller and sat back abruptly. She brought her chin up high and the soft line of her neck tensed with her defiant posture. "Captain Sephard has no reason to fear anything you might do," she said positively. "And if you think a smuggler can be either caught or punished in this province, you are even more foolish than I thought."

"A smuggler of gunpowder and muskets would be caught," James said in a harsh tone. "And he would probably be hanged. One word from me and every customs official in New York would be searching for Sephard's cargo. They may be bribed or tricked into overlooking routine smuggling, but not traffic in munitions. God above, Miss Luisa, why do you think your inept schemes are bound to work merely because you want them to? Can't you see the game is already

lost? How do you think I knew about the munitions smuggling? Even with what d'Array told me last night I wouldn't have enough information to accuse anyone. So how did I find out?"

"You didn't," Miss Luisa said with unshaken confidence. "You invented it all."

James shook his head sadly. "Hasn't it yet crossed your mind that your confederates must have betrayed you? Even Uncle Ruthven knows. He knew six weeks ago in London. Why else do you think he sent me here? If he had merely wanted to ruin your step-father he could have sued for repayment of the ten-thousand-pound loan that is outstanding and then——"

"He did!" Miss Luisa said bluntly. "He demanded payment months ago."

"Nothing of the sort," James said stiffly. "I know that isn't true. Uncle Ruthven would never make an idle threat. If he had meant to call in that loan, your company would probably have been sold into bankruptcy long ago. Haven't you wit enough to see that? Uncle Ruthven is willing to pay generously to save the House of Coult from embarrassment. But if all hope of discretion and concealment is already lost, Uncle Ruthven will have to consider his own interests. I will have to present my information to the authorities in order to keep the House of Coult free of any involvement. Is that quite clear to you, Miss Luisa? I want you to understand my motives. You, your step-father, even Sephard, have a way out. We will be back in New York soon and I think you had best find those gentlemen and tell them I will give them one last opportunity to save themselves."

Miss Luisa had to swallow heavily before she could reply, but her voice was firm, unimpressed by the vehemence of James' anger. "How ridiculous you are. You shouldn't try to deceive me, Mr. Coult. We both know that Sir Ruthven demanded payment of that loan months ago, and threatened to sue if my father delayed too long. As for this nonsense about smuggled munitions, how could Sir Ruthven know about something that has never happened? Obviously he has been misinformed. And it is thoroughly despicable of you to try to frighten me with such falsehoods."

James smacked his hand hard against the railing with a sharp report. "My God!" he groaned. "What more do you need to be convinced? If it weren't for— Wait!" James almost laughed in relief. "I had nearly forgotten," he went on more quietly. "I have a second letter that I was supposed to deliver to Uncle Douglas. You will please observe its date. It was written in London before I left."

The girl accepted the letter gingerly, read the address, and turned it to inspect the seals.

"You have my permission to open it," James said. He waited until the girl had broken the seals and then he leaned to the deck and picked up his wet shoes. He rubbed off caked sand with his handkerchief and then slipped them on over his damp stockings. The breeze had dried his coat to a mottled pattern and he was able to brush away much of the sand and mud, though the delicate fabric remained sadly rumpled and stained. James did not look at the girl until she made a small, muffled sound.

"Are you convinced now, Miss Luisa?" he asked politely.

"It isn't true!" she insisted in a thin, shocked tone. "It simply can't be true!"

"It is true," James said. "You will note that Uncle Ruthven specifically mentions the ten-thousand-pound loan he made your step-father, and authorizes me to file suit for repayment. The documents are in my possession, Miss Luisa, so how on earth can you maintain that he tried to force payment months ago? Another vicious lie from Captain Sephard, I suppose? No matter. The most important element in that letter is Uncle Ruthven's accusation against your step-father. There is no doubt that Uncle Douglas has used the reserve funds of his company to purchase munitions from the Dutch at Statia. The bills of exchange have already been presented for payment. Uncle Ruthven is offering his brother the simple choice of selling out or going to prison. I will not hesitate to take action if I must. I can see by your expression that you don't think me capable of it. I wish I could convince you, Miss Luisa. Possibly I will have better luck with Uncle Douglas. I must see him as soon as we get back to the city. Can you arrange it? Where is he?"

Miss Luisa continued briefly to glare cold defiance, but as James watched her, her eyes closed suddenly and tears spilled down her cheeks in uncontrollable streams. She cupped her face with both hands and bent forward, shoulders rocking tensely with the intolerable ache of grief.

"Dear God," James whispered. "What did I say to cause all that? I have been speaking roughly of you and Uncle Douglas, but I had to make you understand. He's bound for prison unless—"

"You fool!" Miss Luisa snapped in sudden fury. "You complacent, arrogant puppy! You've guessed so many things. Put your clever, evil mind on my father. Can't you guess what has happened to him?"

"No," James said. "Is he—"

"He's dead! He died of fever in Charles Town more than

a month ago. Do you think he would leave me alone to—to—”

“I’m sorry. Very sorry.” James moved around the end of the tiller and sat beside the girl. He put one hand lightly, timidly, on her shoulder. “Please forgive me,” he said softly. “I would never have spoken so, if I’d known.”

James looked off over the weeping girl’s head, staring at nothing, his mouth pinched to a hard, tight line. Why the devil had she kept her step-father’s death a secret so long? How had she managed it?

It was a long moment before Miss Luisa brought her hands down from her face, sat back and dabbled at her eyes with a scrap of handkerchief. She drew in long slow, deliberate breaths, and sooner than seemed possible to James, she had regained much of that unnatural composure, that artificial and precariously balanced poise with which she confronted the world.

Her brave pretense was obvious to James now. In a vague way it reminded him of his own futile pretenses. He too had been playing a part, designed by his Uncle Ruthven, basically unsuitable for James, but required by the situation and the problems that constantly confronted Coult and Company. Miss Luisa’s pose clearly was forced upon her by much the same need, and was equally unsuitable for her.

“You’d best tell me about it if you can,” James suggested in a gentle voice. “I’ll have to know sometime. I’ve made a number of mistakes lately, I’m afraid. I am likely to make even more unless you explain. Why have you kept Uncle Douglas’ death a secret? You have, haven’t you? It isn’t generally known in New York?”

Miss Luisa shook her head briefly. “No, I—Captain Sephard said—” She swallowed with a painful movement of her head and tried again. “Father’s financial position was too—unstable. I went over the accounts with Captain Sephard and we decided to say nothing about father’s death until the *Lady Luisa* returned from the Caribbean. It—it hasn’t been easy, pretending—”

“My God!” James breathed. “I should think it hasn’t. But why? What made it necessary?”

“My father’s debts,” she said simply. “His creditors would have forced me to settle his estate and then there would have been nothing left. Nothing at all.”

“I can’t believe that,” James muttered.

“What do you know about it?” Miss Luisa demanded in swift, cold rage. “Even repaying his debt to Sir Ruthven would have forced us into bankruptcy, and Uncle Ruthven was insisting—” Her voice dwindled slowly and she turned her

head away from James briefly. Her eyes dropped to the folded letter in her hand and she frowned in perplexed concentration.

"I see you have already realized," James said dryly, "that Uncle Ruthven has not been pressing your step-father. Who said he was? Was it Captain Sephard?"

"Yes," the girl said slowly. "But he wasn't, was he?"

"No. And I suggest you might wonder about the other lies Sephard has told you. What makes you think your step-father's creditors would be any more insistent than Uncle Ruthven?"

"You don't know them!" Miss Luisa said firmly, completely sure. "If I had brought my father's body back from the Carolinas, they would have descended upon me like a pack of hungry wolves. You don't know what they're like. We lived here in shabby poverty for years before Sir Ruthven could be induced to help my father. By then it was too late for him. The fine merchant princes of New York thought of him only as a poor relation of the great Sir Ruthven Coult, a man to be dismissed as incompetent and worthless. Given the opportunity they would have stripped me clean. You don't know what it is like to be poor. You've never lacked for anything in your life. But I know, Mr. Coult! I was born to genteel poverty, but I will never return to it. Never!"

"No one wants you to," James said patiently. "I know Uncle Ruthven doesn't want you to. And I don't believe your other creditors will—"

"You don't know! You understand nothing of our life here. Let me tell you what it means to succeed as a merchant in New York when the lordly Beekmans and DeLanceys and Van Cortlandts control every source of profit. You would be driven to the by-ways and back-alleys of commerce, and you would live on the scraps from the tables of your betters. But my father was very fortunate with the privateers he sent out during the war. He made a place for himself even in competition with the greedy New York merchants. And they hated him for it! Any excuse would have served if they could have ruined him. Hearing of his death at this minute would give them their opportunity. My father owes a great deal of money, as every merchant does. All commerce in the colonies is dependent upon credit. When father died I could scarcely have covered his obligations even by selling the *Lady Luisa*. But with the profit from this voyage, there should be no difficulty."

"That is how Captain Sephard explained it to you?" James asked quietly.

"Yes!" Miss Luisa said defiantly. "I suppose you think he was wrong?"

"I didn't say that," James objected mildly. "But what about the thirty thousand pounds in your reserve? Wouldn't that have covered all the outstanding obligations?"

"No. I don't know what—oh, I can't remember all the details. Captain Sephard—"

"Yes, I can see Captain Sephard's hand in all this," James said. "I'll inspect your accounts straightaway. After all, I represent a one-third interest, and I cannot believe the company is doing as poorly as Sephard has said. This cargo, which is to save you, do you expect it soon?"

"Today."

"And Captain Sephard intended to get it unloaded while I was out of the way? I see. Is it all contraband?"

"Everything is contraband these days," Miss Luisa said more calmly. "The Continental Congress forbids importation of English goods. England forbids importation from any other country. Either a merchant becomes a smuggler or he ceases to be a merchant."

"Yes, I appreciate that. But I'm not talking about Dutch tea or Spanish cloth or French sugar. I mean genuinely illicit cargoes. Gunpowder, cannon, muskets, and shot. What portion of *Lady Luisa's* cargo is munitions?"

"None," the girl said flatly. "My father would never have—"

"It was he who dealt with Gerardus Bols, Miss Luisa," James broke in quietly. "The reason there is no longer thirty thousand pounds in your reserve is because Uncle Douglas signed drafts for that amount to buy munitions."

"No!"

James shrugged. "The facts are against you. Read Uncle Ruthven's letter again, more carefully. I never knew Uncle Douglas. I don't know if illicit commerce would be appealing to him or not. But Captain Sephard is clearly a man willing to accept profit from any source, if I have judged him aright."

"You haven't," Miss Luisa said. But a trace of dubiety exposed her uncertainty. "You must be wrong," she said slowly. "He was my father's friend, his trusted associate. I can't believe—"

James shifted impatiently. "Nonsense," he said. "See the man for what he is. You may have trusted him in the past, but that doesn't prove him trustworthy, it merely proves you were infatuated with a plausible scoundrel. You know Sephard lied to you about your step-father's debt to Uncle Ruthven, but you don't seem to realize what that means. I

suppose you are trying to convince yourself that Sephard made a mistake, eh? But he didn't, of course. Tell me this: Who first proposed using an impostor to trick me? A thousand guineas to one it was Sephard's idea. It is becoming quite easy to predict what Sephard will do. A dishonest, underhanded solution will always come first to his mind. So the impostor was his idea? I thought so; it sounds like him. And what was I supposed to do if I had accepted that impostor as my uncle? Was I to let him dismiss me and go slinking back to London with my tail between my legs?"

"You don't understand!" the girl almost wailed. "It was nothing like that. We needed time. As soon as *Lady Luisa* was unloaded we could have paid my father's creditors and—"

"Not with the profit from a single cargo, dear lady."

Miss Luisa looked at James in perplexity.

"I don't know what fantasy Sephard has spun for you, but I do know something about merchant shipping, and I can tell you that the profit from any one honest voyage will not make you rich. Of course, I don't know what illicit munitions will fetch in the New York market, but I don't—"

"*Lady Luisa* is not carrying munitions!"

"So you said before," James admitted. He sighed and rose, stretching high overhead and almost yawning. He could see the huddled, lonely figure of the boy Henry crouched on the peak of the sandy knoll, waiting for permission to return. James lifted his arm high and waved.

"Thank you for speaking to me frankly, dear lady," he said. "I feel slightly less bewildered but I won't pretend I understand what has happened. Let us see if I heard you correctly. Your only reason for trying to deceive me with that impostor was to make sure that the *Lady Luisa* could be brought to dock unmolested, so that you could raise money enough to pay your step-father's creditors. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"If there is any traffic in illicit munitions, you know nothing about it? Is that also true?"

"Yes."

"And if I, or anyone else, should discover that the *Lady Luisa's* cargo includes munitions, they will have been placed on board without your knowledge or approval. Correct again?"

"Yes, but I am sure—"

"Of course. I have tried my best to explain why Uncle Ruthven wants to buy your interest—Sephard's interest—"

by the way, who will own your step-father's two-thirds interest when the estate is settled?"

"Captain Sephard and I are equal partners."

"Yes, I see. Do you understand why you must sell?"

"Certainly not. I wish you would stop making such ridiculous offers or threats, or whatever they are."

"I'm sure you do," James said. "But I don't have the option, dear lady. Everything I said earlier when I thought Uncle Douglas was still directing the New York branch now applies equally to you and Captain Sephard. I am willing to concede the possibility that you know nothing of Sephard's traffic in munitions, but that does not change the situation. You and Sephard must sell, or accept the consequences. I am sorry to be so blunt, but I can see no alternative."

"A gentleman would see many," the girl said sharply.

"I am a gentleman, Miss Luisa. I am also a Coult, neither clever nor wise, but determined to protect my family name."

"It is my name too. Had you forgotten?"

"I hadn't forgotten. I thought you had. Because your name is Coult you have a right to expect comfort and assistance from me. As much, let us say, as I have received from you. How much is that, Miss Luisa Coult?"

The girl did not answer. Her wide eyes darkened with wonder and she looked at James. Then she nodded decisively, as if she had finally resolved something in her mind. She turned away and gestured brusquely to Henry who was standing at the water's edge, waiting patiently. He ran out through the shallows and held up the hamper and folded carpet.

"Bring in the anchor, Henry. Then shove us off the sand and help me raise the sail. Where is *Lady Luisa* being unloaded? Did Captain Sephard tell you?"

"North River dock, missy," Henry crowed excitedly, happy at knowing the answer.

"Very well. Hurry, Henry. I want to get Mr. Coult there in time to inspect her cargo." She glanced at James and nodded pointedly. "Now you will see, Mr. Coult."

"So I shall," James said slowly, showing none of the surprise he was feeling. "I have already seen something. You honestly do not expect to find anything out-of-the-way about *Lady Luisa's* cargo, do you?"

"Of course not."

"I think you believe that," James said. "Will you consider a wager, Miss Luisa?"

"Wager? About what?" she asked absently. "Hurry, Henry!"

"If I discover munitions aboard *Lady Luisa*, you will sell your interest to me immediately."

"My interest? But what of Captain—"

"Forget Sephard for the moment. With a two-thirds interest, Uncle Ruthven will easily be able to handle Sephard. And surely you would not want to defend him if he has been smuggling munitions?"

"No, but—"

"Then you accept?" James asked with some eagerness.

"And what are you wagering, Mr. Coult?"

"Nothing," James admitted. "An apology, if that would be acceptable. But the question will not arise, Miss Luisa. I am sure we will find munitions on board. Do you accept?"

"On such terms? Why should I?"

"You have been trying to blind yourself to the truth about Sephard," James said. "I am curious to see how far you will go in your effort to deceive yourself. Show me, Miss Luisa. Does the wager frighten you?"

"I am perfectly confident," the girl said in a voice that suggested she was not at all confident. "I accept. I will insist upon an apology, publicly, in the presence of Captain Sephard."

"Agreed," James said readily. "Agreed willingly, and with great admiration for a gallant lady. If I were the clever man you think me, Miss Luisa, I would never have misjudged you. I would like to retract something I said earlier. I think your interest in Coult and Company contains a measureable element of good will, and whatever price we decide upon will be increased by twenty-five thousand pounds in recognition of that fact. I hope you will accept?"

Miss Luisa smiled derisively as she watched Henry heaving at the sail. "You are very generous, Mr. Coult, but there will be no sale. Your money is safe."

James settled himself on the wide cockpit seat, content for the moment. To his mind it was completely obvious that Miss Luisa felt no confidence whatever in her opinion of that rascal Sephard. But she had been thoroughly gulled for a long time and she would need proof before accepting the truth. The moment Sephard was exposed, everything would fall into place for her. Until then her fierce sense of loyalty would require a defense of Sephard, even though her heart knew the man for a total fraud.

"It will take an hour or so to sail round to the North River docks, I suppose," he said easily. "I have an idea you might want to consider during that time, Miss Luisa."

"Well?"

"It has just occurred to me that when Captain Sephard persuaded you to keep me away from the city all day he

might have had another purpose in mind as well. Beyond assuring my absence, I mean."

Miss Luisa frowned slightly. She grasped the tiller and held it hard over. She pretended to be excessively busy but until Henry had the sails trimmed there would be no need for vigilance. After a moment she glanced suspiciously at James and said impatiently, "Very well, Mr. Coult. I'm listening."

"I thought," James said quietly, "that Sephard might have been equally interested in keeping you away from the *Lady Luisa*."

◀ CHAPTER 17 ▶

THE RETURN to New York was swift and almost silent. *Bonita* displayed an unexpected turn of speed now that she was running smoothly with the wind and current. Sailing in the East River brought constant surprises, many of them pleasant, James thought, as he lay almost sprawling on the cockpit seat, watching the withdrawn, intent profile of Miss Luisa outlined against the soft sky. Except for a few necessary and very brief orders to Henry she had not spoken since leaving the tiny island.

Possibly she was remembering, James thought, remembering things done and said, weighing, comparing, reconsidering past judgments. He could not guess how severely hurt she might be when she was compelled to recognize Sephard in his true colors. But she knew already, he suspected, even if she could not yet face the truth. If she could prepare herself now, the inevitable moment might not be so deeply painful.

The only help James could offer was a friendly silence and that contribution he made so willingly that he dozed once or twice before Miss Luisa swung the tiller over and called briskly to Henry to lower sail. *Bonita* slid along the worn, crusted pilings of a riverside dock and James sat up, blinking his eyes.

"Isn't this the same dock we—" he began.

"Yes, of course it is," Miss Luisa said impatiently. "Secure that bow line, Henry. Now, Mr. Coult, will you climb the ladder first? And please don't stare at me like that. I haven't

changed my mind about *Lady Luisa*. But I left my carriage on the wharf this morning and I don't want the horses to stand any longer. We can drive across to the North River quays faster than we can sail."

"Of course," James said promptly. He gripped the swaying rope ladder and probed for the bottom rung with his damp shoe.

"Henry, take *Bonita* up to the Totten and Crossfield yards and pick up her spare suit of sails. They should be ready. Then sail her back to Turtle Bay and anchor at our landing. And for heaven's sake, don't forget to see she's secure fore and aft."

James grasped an upright post on the dock and stepped onto the firm timbers. He turned and waited to see if Miss Luisa wanted his help.

"Mr. Coult," the light, highly inflected voice called to him. "Did you have a pleasant cruise?"

James swung quickly to face the waiting landau. There, comfortably relaxed on the bright leather cushions was Count d'Array, slumped down indolently with his feet up, hat low against the sun. D'Array lifted himself languidly.

"Is Miss Luisa—ah, there you are, my dear lady. I have taken the liberty of waiting in your beautiful carriage. Most impressive. Your coachman was kind enough to offer me a seat."

"Of course, Mr. d'Array," the girl said dubiously. "Did you wish to see me?"

"I had hoped to find you both. Captain Sephard mentioned that you had taken Mr. Coult sailing from this wharf, so I thought I would wait. And here you are! But, Mr. Coult, you look as though you'd had an accident. Nothing serious, dear fellow?"

James brushed distastefully at his stained coat. "Mere clumsiness, Count," he said sourly. "I am not an expert sailor."

D'Array was hiding his amusement very skillfully, James thought. But then any man trained to the preposterous French court would have learned how to smother his laughter. Today the slim, elegant Count was not his usual dandified self, in fact he was dressed as if bound for a rough day's shooting, in leather breeches and high soft boots, a simple braided coat of *cord-du-roi* cut in the military style and buttoned high over a plain broadcloth waistcoat. But his hat was splendidly laced in gold and his ever-present rapier swung at his side. He slapped a pair of high-cuffed French gloves against his leg as he bowed to Miss Luisa.

"I too must apologize for my appearance," he said with a

meager, deprecatory shrug. "I was prepared for an active day, but my plans have miscarried. May I explain why? Could you and Miss Luisa spare a few minutes?"

James glanced at the girl, frowned warningly, then nodded to d'Array. "Of course, Count. We have no pressing engagement. Miss Luisa was going to drive me to the Queen's Head so I could change to a dry coat. Will you come along?"

"You are very amiable," d'Array said. "One moment while I speak to my man."

He spun on one high heel and strode off down the wharf toward a high-wheeled hansom waiting in the street, his thin-shanked spurs tapping musically with each step. When he was out of hearing, James took the girl's arm and walked her away from the carriage and the listening coachman.

"If d'Array hears about the *Lady Luisa*, he will have her cargo confiscated. We cannot—"

"But there is nothing wrong about the cargo!" Miss Luisa insisted. "Let him—"

"You are either willfully obstinate or downright witless," James said, a mounting exasperation sharpening his tone. "You know what d'Array is looking for, and you know, or you should know, that you can't afford to have the *Lady Luisa's* cargo subjected to a serious search. You may believe the cargo is reasonably innocent, but what if you are wrong? Do you want to see the King's broad-arrow painted on the ship's sides? Why take such an appalling risk?"

"I am not quite as stupid as you think me, Mr. Coult," the girl said, tight-lipped. "Why do you pretend to worry about me? What does it matter to you?"

"At the moment," James said slowly, forcing himself to calmness, "I cannot imagine why I trouble. But as long as there is any possibility that the House of Coult will not be involved in this sorry affair, I must keep trying. Though I warn you, Miss Luisa. If d'Array inspects the *Lady Luisa*, that is the end of your plans. He will most certainly find munitions, and when that happens, you and Sephard will hang together. I will not—"

Only the quick, instinctive response of a healthy young man could have brought James' hand up before Miss Luisa could slap him. Her open palm smacked against his knuckles with an audible impact and the girl winced with pain. James clutched both her arms above the elbow and turned her swiftly so that she faced away from the carriage, away from d'Array who was walking slowly back toward them.

"Listen to me, you little fool," he whispered with a savage insistence. "Do you really want to see Sephard hanged? I

am trying to help you. If I have to help Sephard at the same time, that can't be helped. Listen to me, and believe what I say. Keep d'Array away from the *Lady Luisa* at any cost. Do you understand that? At any cost!"

"So that you—"

"So that I can save your neck!" James cut in furiously. "Now remember what I told d'Array. You are driving me back to the Queen's Head. I'll try to get rid of him quickly, but if he won't leave, we'd best pretend we have arranged to drive through the countryside. When we're free of d'Array, we can go to the *Lady Luisa*, but not until then."

It could have been nothing he said, James was sure, that ultimately persuaded her. Probably it was something in his expression, or the rare vehemence of his voice. But for whatever reason, she did finally nod in agreement. James sighed so loudly that it sounded like a gasp.

"Do I interrupt, Miss Luisa?" d'Array inquired politely. "I should not like to—"

"Nothing of the sort," James said with unusual boisterousness. "Delighted to see you, Count. I have spent most of our lazy cruise today telling Miss Luisa of the changes that have come to London since she was last there. I'm sure she would be equally interested to hear the news of Paris."

And Miss Luisa concurred with a charming winsomeness. She allowed d'Array to escort her to the carriage, pointedly ignoring James. When d'Array had climbed in, James followed, taking the seat facing the rear. He aimed a vacuously pleasant smile above their heads and gave himself to his own thoughts.

There was no doubt in his mind that Sephard's criminal activities had placed the House of Coult in grave danger. Only with great good fortune and Uncle Ruthven's determined, ruthless management had the bank survived after the Scottish uprising of '45. If the family were once again to be identified with rebellion, the English would be forcibly reminded of the bank's Scottish origin, and the old, furious accusations of thirty years past would be revived with added intensity. The House of Coult would never be permitted to function again, no matter how much influence and bribery Uncle Ruthven might exercise. It made little difference whether trade in munitions had originated with Uncle Douglas or with Captain Sephard. To an English mind, the two were identical, and both so closely allied with the London bank that no distinction would be made. Exposure of Sephard might be enough to ruin Uncle Ruthven, and James, too.

Count d'Array would expose Sephard the moment his suspicions were confirmed. That was his duty, and perfectly

proper. James could hardly object. So far, however, the Count still seemed to regard Sephard as his ally, and James would have to do everything he could to bolster that foolish opinion, until it was safe for him to act for himself. Any device would serve, to keep d'Array's attention diverted from the *Lady Luisa*. Even force, if it came to such a drastic point.

James brought his absent-minded gaze down to Miss Luisa's wind-blown hair. Sunlight and a brisk breeze had given her an added color and even in her slightly crumpled gown, she looked amazingly cheerful, brightly amused. She was carrying the situation off admirably, he thought. Few young girls, few people of any age or experience for that matter, could have conducted themselves better, considering the trying circumstances. And now that he knew the fretful worries that plagued her constantly, James' admiration rose immensely. But no matter how sincerely he sympathized, he could not allow himself to forget his responsibility to Uncle Ruthven. If he could save Miss Luisa, he would and gladly, but it was his first duty to safeguard the House of Coult.

The coachman drew up sedately in the Queen's Head yard and the footman leaped to the ground to put down the step. Miss Luisa stroked her gloves smoothly up toward the wrist, waiting for d'Array to leave the carriage. The Count smiled at James with that peculiar and complete spurious compassion that men reserve for rejected suitors. He bowed slightly, still seated, urging James to dismount first. The girl's sly punishment was well merited, James was forced to admit, but when he noticed her eyeing him, trying to gauge the effect of her stratagem, he was hard put to keep from laughing. He was growing light-headed, he warned himself. He had been subjected to too many pressures, too much wild speculation, too many impossible alternatives. Just now a trace of sobriety was called for, a measure of solid mature consideration, if he could manage to find that in himself. He shifted toward the open door, then stopped.

"My apologies, Miss Luisa," he said. "The landlord was not able to furnish a withdrawing room for my use. Wouldn't you prefer to wait in the carriage while I—"

"Certainly not, sir," the girl almost laughed. "Mr. Francis maintains a thoroughly respectable tavern. My father has brought me here often. Mr. d'Array will have a glass of wine and I shall try the landlord's syllabub. We shall be comfortable enough."

"I dare say," James muttered. He climbed down, letting the footman steady his arm.

D'Array followed promptly, offered his arm, and escorted Miss Luisa into the tavern, blandly ignoring James.

Their customs are different here, James was thinking. A tenderly reared young American lady could enter a common tavern without losing her standing in decent society, though in England she would surround herself with chaperones, or run the risk of savagely damaging gossip. And on the whole, the colonial attitude is far more sensible, James considered. The air seems fresher here, the postures less artificial, the people more concerned with substance than shadow. But it would be quite a time before James would fail to be mildly surprised at each fresh revelation.

He entered the tavern behind his guests and ushered them into the Long Room. "I am sorry that I cannot—"

He broke off abruptly when he noticed Crutchfield fidgeting nervously on the narrow staircase, his thin wiry body contorted in the effort to signal James silently.

"What on earth are you up to?" James demanded. "Come down here and see to Miss Luisa's comfort. A glass of wine, possibly, or some of the landlord's syllabub. Take care of it, Crutchfield."

James moved up the stairs past Crutchfield as he spoke, ignoring the man's frantic efforts to interrupt him.

"Later, Crutchfield," he said briskly. "Take care of my guests, man. Get on with it. Then come to my room. I'll want your help."

James climbed the curving staircase and went along the upper hallway toward his room, slipping his stained coat off his shoulders. He paused at the entrance, surprised to find the door unlocked. Crutchfield's carelessness again, he thought with some irritation. He pushed open the door impatiently.

Three men were sitting in a stiff unmoving row on the edge of his bed, like rooks on a fencrail. Three heads turned to regard James with flat, expressionless eyes. None of the men spoke.

"What is this?" James demanded harshly. "Who brought you here?" He dropped his coat on a chair near the door and remained where he was, a wary distance from the bed.

"Mr. Crutchfield, he said—" one of the men began in a thin nasal tone.

James snorted. He opened the buttons of his long waistcoat with a quick flip of his hand and stripped it off. "Mr. Crutchfield will be here in a moment," he said. "In the meantime I intend to change my clothes, if you gentlemen have no objection?"

Three solemn pairs of eyes blinked once, then focussed steadily on James, following his movements as he tossed his waistcoat on the chair, and disapproving of his carelessness. All watched him pull his shirt up over his head, kick his

damp shoes into a corner and struggle to peel off his sodden, tight breeches. When James stood in his drawers, all three heads bobbed with a limited sort of approval, as if James were a young horse in good condition and might be worth buying if the price was right. James snorted again and opened the door of his cupboard.

The three men shared James' uncertainty at the sight of the long rank of clothes hanging inside. All seemed to agree when James selected a rifle-green coat and put it on a chair. Approval was more apparent when James took out a pair of white doeskin breeches and stepped into them.

Crutchfield clattered up the stairs and came inside just in time to help James with a fresh shirt. He tucked it in deftly and cinched James' breeches at the waistline. "What now? The black morocco shoes, or will you—"

"No, I'll wear boots," James said. "But present your guests first and see if you can explain why you have given them the run of my bedroom."

"No need to huff," Crutchfield muttered, almost inaudibly. "Tried to tell you, but you would come dashing up here like a scared whippet. No patience, no thought for others, that's your trouble."

"Stop mumbling," James said briskly. "Who are they?"

Crutchfield straightened stiffly. He marched with solemn dignity to the bed and bowed to his friends. For the first time James looked at them closely.

All were physically excessive men, dressed in the decent drab subfusc of respectable townsmen, hardly the sort of friends the raffish Crutchfield usually chose. One, who stood a head taller than James when he got to his feet, but was less than half the heft, was introduced as Mr. Aaron Mears. The second, a portly man with stubby red jowls and an inordinate belly, was Moses Dow. The last was almost ignored. Small, wizened, elderly and taciturn, he could easily be overlooked until he spoke. Then his tremendous basso-profundo boomed in the small room like the portentous sound of doom. He was Sylvanus Billett.

All were leading lights of the Sons of Liberty. Mr. Dow was currently chairman of that body and also a delegate to the Continental Congress from New York. Mr. Mears was head of the Committee of Mechanics, a position which Crutchfield mentioned with a respectful air that was close to awe. Before Mr. Billett's merits could be recited, James interrupted impatiently.

"Very well, very well. I am James Coult, gentlemen. You wished to speak to me? Come help me with my boots, Crutchfield."

"Get 'em on yourself," Crutchfield said dourly. "I'm a member of this committee come to talk to Your high-and-mighty Honor."

"Oh, my God, not again," James groaned. He slipped hooks under the loops of his white-topped boots and stepped in with a mighty stamp. Quite simple, as he had always expected. The other went on as easily and James tossed the boothooks into Crutchfield's lap. "Well, get on with it," he said sharply. He draped a fresh cravat around his neck and turned to look into a small mirror.

"We'll wait till we have your complete attention," Crutchfield said bluntly.

James halted and swung toward him, glaring him into silence. "That's enough," he said coldly. "I haven't time for this nonsense. I have guests waiting. Out with it."

Mr. Billett's incredible bass broke the deadlock after a brief, thoughtful moment. Pronounced in that somber tone, the most banal phrases took on an added importance, and James found himself listening carefully in spite of himself.

"Being as Mr. Crutchfield has told us how you're such an important man with the House of Coult, sir, we took it on ourselves, as you might say, to come and throw ourselves and our sacred cause on your mercy."

James stared at the man incredulously. His hands absently completed the knotting of his cravat. "My mercy?" he echoed in a hollow tone. "Crutchfield, what foolishness is this?"

"He multiplieth words without knowledge," Crutchfield intoned sourly. "If you'd listen, you'd learn, laddie."

James muttered savagely under his breath. Crutchfield's irrepressible sense of independence had entered upon a new and more vigorous phase since coming to New York. James buttoned his waistcoat and took up the rifle-green coat to inspect the flared shoulders, the pinched waist, the pale French-grey facings. As always, rebellious or not, Crutchfield maintained his clothes in excellent condition. James drew on the tight-fitting coat and pulled down the lace cuffs of his shirt, turning them back carefully. He cleared the pockets of his soiled suit and distributed watch and keys, snuffbox, purse and a fresh handkerchief through the pockets of his green coat, very conscious all the while of the wide, watchful eyes of his silent audience.

"I'm listening," James said wearily. Possibly if he delayed a few minutes longer, d'Array would be ready to leave when he came downstairs. In any event, when Crutchfield was determined to say something, no power on earth could stop him. James pulled a chair around to face the bed. "Sit down. Make yourselves comfortable, gentlemen. I am pressed for

time, but a minute or two will not matter. Crutchfield, have you offered your guests any refreshment?"

Crutchfield blasted contempt through his hooked nose. "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary, as a roaring lion walketh about, seeking whom he may devour."

"An excellent sentiment," James murmured. "I wish I knew what it meant. Now, gentlemen, if you will take nothing, will one of you please explain to me—without parables, please—what brings you here?"

"Mr. Crutchfield has said it better than we could," Mr. Billett's splendid bass announced. "Especially that part about the roaring lion."

"Surely not," James objected politely. "Will you try, Mr. Mears? Mr. Dow?"

It was the rotund, red-faced Moses Dow who accepted James' invitation. He balanced himself gingerly on the edge of the bed, laced his pudgy fingers together with some difficulty, and fixed James with the cold basilisk stare of a pettifogging lawyer out to expose a perjurer.

"The crux of the matter, Mr. Coult, not to put too fine a point on it, the very heart of the matter, you might say, is that we haven't got the money."

James nodded. Because it became apparent that he was supposed to make some reply, he murmured, "So few of us have. What money are you referring to?"

"We promised Captain Sephard we'd have it today," Mr. Mears put in eagerly. "And we would have too, Mr. Coult, only the way trade has fallen off in New York lately, what with no goods to sell, and hardly anybody hiring decent, respectable workmen, we've been having trouble. We tried to find Captain Sephard, but nobody seems to know just where he is, and then Mr. Crutchfield happened by and told us—well, that's why we come to see you."

A sudden coldness touched at James' spine and he stiffened in his chair. "Money?" he said heavily. "Captain Sephard? What is your business with Captain Sephard?"

The three heads turned together for a silent consultation. Crutchfield made a rude noise deep in his throat and looked at James with open disgust. "Tell him, gentlemen," he advised the committee. "He's a sly one, our Jamie is. Likes to be coaxed sometimes."

A sharp rebuke died unspoken on James' tongue. This was no time to distract the committee. Crutchfield could wait.

"What business?" he repeated sharply.

But the swift, unspoken conference had decided upon caution. Mr. Billett eyed James warily. "You don't know?"

James shook his head. "I will be completely frank with you, gentlemen. I have no connection whatever with Captain Sephard. The New York branch of Coult and Company is entirely independent of the London house. I do not know what business you may have with Captain Sephard, but I could easily and accurately guess, I think."

"Don't," Mr. Mears said coldly, in clear warning.

"As you wish," James said. "But if I were you, I'd give it up. No venture of Captain Sephard's will ever prosper. I don't believe that he will be able to deliver whatever merchandise he has promised to you."

Moses Dow dropped one enormous red hand on Crutchfield's narrow shoulder and turned the slight wiry man to look at him. Dow did not appear to grip hard but James could see the spasm of pain as blood seeped from Crutchfield's thin, drawn face.

"You can't put the blame on Crutchfield," he said. "He didn't understand the position I'm in. Neither do any of you, obviously. But before you go I want to make it completely clear. Please release Crutchfield, Mr. Dow, and attend to me."

James waited until the committee's attention was focussed toward him. He spoke slowly, with hard conviction.

"I think I can promise you that Coult and Company's New York branch will be closed by this time tomorrow. Please don't interrupt yet, Mr. Mears. Let me finish. All obligations will be met, of course, but merchandise that is due will probably not be delivered. I hope there is no need for me to be more explicit? Any contraband in the temporary possession of Coult and Company will be turned over to the appropriate authorities."

"You can't do that, laddie," Crutchfield burst out.

James lifted his hand in a commanding gesture. "I have to," he said. "The House of Coult would be ruined if I did anything else. Consider that, Crutchfield. You can appreciate how delicate this situation really is for me. I will expect you to help me explain it to these gentlemen."

"Tory!" Mr. Billett boomed in a deep enraged voice that directed damnation upon James.

"No," Crutchfield said with a dour twist of his mouth. "No, you canna name Jamie a Tory. He's a braw laddie, and no man to turn on his friends." He leaned forward and touched James' knee with a prodding finger. "Is it in your power to destroy us, laddie? Ah, do not answer. I can see that it is. But do you understand what we have come for, what purpose it is meant for? Will you not reconsider? Will you not remember your dead father and how he came to die? Will you not remember the '45, and the filthy Hessian troops

sent marching through the Highlands by our noble King? Remember, Jamie! Give us a chance to set it all right!"

"I cannot," James said heavily. "God forgive me, but I cannot listen to you. My heart listens too, gentlemen, but I cannot let it speak to me. You have no right to ask."

"No right!" Crutchfield exploded. "Callum Crutchfield that marched with the Prince, that fought beside your dead father and four of his brothers? I have no right to ask Jamie Coult for the lend of his hand in the time of my trouble?"

"I cannot," James said soberly. "The choice is not mine." He rose on stiff, trembling legs and looked long and closely at the four men who faced him.

"I didn't know, when I came here," he said quietly, "what grievances you had borne for so long. It may sound foolish to you to hear from me that many people in England share your feelings. I am sorry for all that. I haven't the power to change my attitude. It isn't mine to change. I think I understand why you want this—merchandise—and if I could, I'd see you got it. I cannot. It will come badly from me, I know, but I can suggest only patience. It comes hard these days, in the light of your grievances, but I doubt that you'll cure anything by force of arms, any more than we Scots did in the '45. I think you're ill-advised to think of rebellion, but if your minds are fixed on fighting, I'd not try to stop you. But please do not ask me to help you. I am already committed."

Moses Dow pushed himself slowly up to his feet. He rocked back on his heels to counterbalance the weight of his belly, and thrust his red, stubby jaw at James.

"Many and pious are the speeches," he declared in a volume meant for an outdoor meeting. "Sympathy we are offered by the wagonload, but not an ounce of help. Patience! That is the cry of these whining bootlickers. Patience and yet more patience! But the English have no patience. Six thousand troops are being sent to America to add to the fiendish numbers already here. Why? To show the King's patience? Or to grind the free-born Americans into the dirt? Whose hand is it—"

"Be still, Moses," Mr. Mears said gently. He stood beside his fellow committeeman and put a bony hand on his sleeve. "He is right, Mr. Coult, but I reckon you're in no mood for speeches. We've been through a lot, from first to last, and sometimes we don't remember there are people in the world who haven't even heard about our problems, and wouldn't care if they had. We've got troubles a-plenty in New York, Mr. Coult, troubles you in England never even hear of. We've got an elected Assembly, all Tory merchants and landowners, and they pass every bill the King wants passed. Most

folks in England thinks it's us folks talking. But it ain't, Mr. Coult, not by a long chalk. That Assembly ain't stood for election for eight long years because the Governor knows we'd turn out every man-jack of them if we had the choice. But we got around Old Silverlocks when we founded the Sons of Liberty and the Committee of Correspondence, and the Committee of Mechanics. We beat the Stamp Act and we sent our own representatives to the first Continental Congress. And when the assembly wouldn't appoint delegates to the Second Congress, we got around that, too. We elected twelve delegates ourselves in a public meeting. I don't suppose you heard about that, either, did you, Mr. Coult? But it happened just yesterday at the Royal Exchange. We've been patient, Mr. Coult. Nobody can say we ain't. We've already been patient for fifteen years. Even when Old Silverlocks had me and Mr. Billett arrested last week, we were real patient, weren't we, Sylvanus? The Liberty Boys would have torn that gaol apart but for us. Now, we mean to go on being patient, Mr. Coult, even with you. But we're going to do what we have to do."

James nodded. The quiet intensity of the tall, worn man was compelling, but James could not allow himself to be affected. Again, as he had often throughout his brief time in New York, he felt the strong appeal of these vigorous, self-respecting men who stood firm and confident where most Englishmen James had known would have cringed and scraped. These Americans seemed to be a totally new breed of man.

"We can't read what's in the future," Mears went on calmly. "If we can live peaceably and calmly, we will. We haven't gone storming around. We elected some committees to handle the public business the way we want it handled, but Old Silverlocks called out the army to put us down. Even then we didn't fight, Mr. Coult. We won't fight unless we're pushed to it. But we're all teetering on the edge of the black pit these days. None of us can tell what lies ahead. Am I making myself clear, Mr. Coult?"

"Reasonably so, Mr. Mears," James said as evenly as he could. "I respect your position, as I said before. Much of what you have said is new to me, and hearing it fortifies my sympathy. But I am neither colonial nor English. My interests do not run directly with yours and it would be rank hypocrisy for me to pretend they did. So I cannot see—"

"Why, we just wanted you to understand us, Mr. Coult," Mears said softly. He signalled to his committee and together they moved toward the door. "When we come for that—merchandise—that Captain Sephard promised us, I hope

you won't be standing in the road. We're patient men, make no mistake about it. We'll wait and we'll bite the bullet and we'll feed our children on husks and then we'll wait some more. Maybe there won't be no trouble if the King understands how we feel. Down here we're not hell-bent on fighting, the way folks are up in Boston. But we're just as determined. I reckon you heard that General Gage in Boston had to send all the way down here because he couldn't find any masons or carpenters in Boston to build barracks for his troops? And how many New Yorkers do you think hired out to Gage?"

James shook his head, strangely fascinated, unable to interrupt.

"Not a one. Not a living soul," Mears said in a quiet, reflective voice. "There's a sloop moored at Murray's Wharf right now, loaded with supplies for Gage, but there ain't a pilot in New York will take it out to sea. We are being downright patient, I'd say, Mr. Coult. But we aim to protect ourselves, just like they're doing up in Boston. Gage has got himself a warrant to arrest John Hancock and Sam Adams for treason, but he don't dare serve that warrant, and you know why? Because them Bay Colony people raised twelve thousand militia and armed them good. Now, we didn't none of us ask the King to send thousands of Lobsterbacks to live in our towns and ruckus around with our women and fall down drunk in our streets. Now that there ain't no French in Canada to come rampaging down at us, we don't need British soldiers, and we don't want them. Any soldiers sent to America are sent here to keep us under control, not to protect us. What we need is some way to protect ourselves against those soldiers. We'll find it, too. We're determined men, Mr. Coult, and I'd say you'd do well to think about what we say."

"You have given me much to think about," James said quietly. "I cannot change my mind."

Aaron Mears stared at him for a long silent moment. Then he nodded in curt dismissal and walked with easy, shambling strides toward the door. Moses Dow pushed down the latch and went out into the hall. It was left to the stentorian basso of Sylvanus Billett to make the parting comment.

"On your head be it," he said with a threatening solemnity.

Crutchfield closed the door behind them and stood with his back to the wall. "That was not wise, laddie. Those were very determined men, set in their path. They have endured too much to turn back now."

"I know," James said. "In a way, much the same might be said of me. I am not against them but I cannot—"

"I think you will live to regret this day."

"I regret it now," James said. "But any decision would have been wrong in some degree. It's not as simple as you think."

"Yet man is born unto trouble, as the sparks fly upward," Crutchfield said soberly. "I'm disappointed in you this day. I'll be leaving your service when you go back. I would have stayed behind with a heavy heart, but now you've set yourself against me, the parting will not be so troublous to me."

"I'm not against you, Crutchfield," James said. "Surely you don't—"

"He that is not with me is against me."

"Nonsense," James snapped. "That's ham-fisted blasphemy, my lad. You're not God. You're Callum Crutchfield and you're a damned fool in the bargain. Since you're so fond of tags, let me offer one: Forsake not an old friend, for the new is not comparable to him. Does the moral of that seep into your thick Highland skull?"

"Aye," Crutchfield muttered, his eyes turned down. "The words of the wise are as goads."

"Let's have no more of this," James said more calmly. He rested a hand on Crutchfield's thin shoulder. "I'm sorry you've decided to leave me. We've been together a long time. But there's no excuse for parting like enemies. Go break open a good bottle and give a share to your pretty chambermaid. You're getting over-solemn these days, Callum."

"You too, laddie," Crutchfield said with a quick, slashing smile. "You, too."

"I know," James said in the doorway. "But I have no choice."

◀ CHAPTER 18 ▶

JAMES COULT went down the curving staircase of the Queen's Head with slow, reluctant steps, conscious for the first time in his life of a total, unrelieved loneliness. As a boy amongst the Southrons of Sussex he had been alien and alone but in the busy private world of a growing boy he had never been aware of loneliness. Uncle Ruthven had warned him not to expect a warm welcome in New York, but unconsciously he had expected to be accepted by his family, and even if that

acceptance were chilly and disapproving, James had thought it would be intimate, familial and deeply personal. But Uncle Douglas had died before his arrival and to Miss Luisa, James was not family, but a stranger. As a result, Crutchfield's gloomy, impudent company had become more important to him than he had realized. That dour, independent old scuffer was a friend, the only one James could name in New York. Losing him seemed especially hard at that moment. But James had no time to think of himself and his private concerns. He paused with his hand on the newel post, looking through the entrance into the nearly deserted Long Room.

On the sidewalk outside, the plain round black hats of the three Liberty Boys passed the wide bank of windows that fronted on Broad Street. The men moved slowly, heads together, Aaron Mears stooping to a conspiratorial level with the others. As James watched, Count d'Array glanced up from his corner chair, lifting his chin high so that he could see over Miss Luisa's head. His coldly measuring eye swept past James quickly and returned to the girl.

There was much about the Frenchman that constantly irritated James, as if he and d'Array were two bristling game cocks contending for mastery of a barnyard. But in spite of that air of suspicion and challenge that seemed habitual with d'Array, he was a strangely likeable man. He too was alone, James realized, far more so than James. But no matter what his feeling, James was not free to choose his friends. He could accept d'Array no more than he could accept the Liberty Boys, or even Captain Sephard. All three, for their separate and varied reasons, were determined upon policies that might ultimately destroy the House of Coult. It was James' duty to frustrate all of them, without allies, without friends or confidants. Each was as dangerous to him as the others, and no personal consideration could alter that fact.

About Miss Luisa he could not be sure. Her anxiety to safeguard her step-father's estate was understandable, even if her methods were childish and downright perilous. Given other circumstances, James would gladly have helped her. But it was also possible that she might be more dangerous to him than any of the others, for when she learned that *Lady Luisa* was carrying munitions, she might take any course. It did not occur to James to wonder why he was so sure munitions had been shipped on *Lady Luisa*. He knew it as men know their own names, recognize their homes, with an unquestioning assurance that needs no other proof.

"Come in, my dear fellow," d'Array called amiably. "We were wondering what was keeping you. I saw your guests leaving, so I knew you would be down soon."

James almost smiled. That was less subtle than d'Array's usual approach, he thought. Obviously d'Array would know the prominent Sons of Liberty if only by sight, for he must know that they were the only likely purchasers of the illicit munitions he was seeking. But he could not possibly know they had come to the Queen's Head to see James. A stab in the dark, nothing more, he assured himself.

"It wasn't guests that delayed me, Count," he said easily. "A domestic crisis though, did demand some attention. My man-servant is planning to leave me, it seems. I can't manage to dissuade him. The free and exciting atmosphere of New York has quite gone to his head."

Miss Luisa smiled absently as James seated himself opposite her. "Trained servants are rare in the provinces, Mr. Coult. I should think your man will easily find a good master here."

"I dare say he might," James said, waving away the serving man. "But Crutchfield has had quite enough of masters, I think. And he has a modest competency. I shouldn't be surprised to see him set himself up in rivalry with Coult and Company."

"Then Coult and Company is to continue in business, sir?" d'Array asked. His long thin mouth slanted curiously. "In New York, I mean?"

"And why shouldn't it?" Miss Luisa demanded.

D'Array shrugged. "Please forgive me. I did not wish to seem overly inquisitive, but I have heard something of Mr. Coult's intentions, and naturally, I thought—" He finished the sentence with another shrug.

"My intentions are not important just now, Count," James said. "If you have seen Captain Sephard today you probably know that I have not yet had a chance to talk to him seriously."

"I did see Captain Sephard briefly, but he was too occupied for conversation," d'Array said. "A merchant's life is obviously not the lazy simplicity one might think it. I knew Captain Sephard many years ago when we were very junior officers, he in the Spanish navy, I in the French. He was assigned to share my cramped quarters when the Spanish fleet paid a ceremonial visit to our base at Toulon. Being young and unimportant, we were forced to entertain ourselves, and after we had exhausted the subject of pretty girls, we spoke often and speculatively about our futures. We both agreed that a naval career was extremely uncertain, dependent as it is upon family influence and the hazards of fortune. Young Sephard's family had no influence in Spain, and he was as skeptical as I of the chances of a shower of gold descending

upon us from the heavens. But in truth we were lazy rascals and what appalled us most was the prospect of endless years of dreary labor. The diplomatic service seemed more attractive to my indolent mind, and I was not surprised to find that Captain Sephard had transformed himself into a merchant."

"That's odd," James said with an undefined curiosity. "I had an idea that Captain Sephard had always been a merchant seaman. I would never have taken him for a naval officer. He plays the part of the rude, untutored mariner to perfection."

D'Array shrugged. "His father was a ship's chandler in Barcelona. I don't suppose he had the formal schooling of most naval officers, but he disguised the lack very well. He was always rather—glib, and impatient. He liked to pretend—you know—to be something different. Many people thought him to be noble, which delighted him, I recall. But even with such foolishness he had rare qualities. For instance, I know that he speaks five languages perfectly, with subtle dialects within each."

"Fancy that," James marveled politely. "But he was a Spanish officer, you said? Why did he leave the navy?"

"It's hardly surprising that a naval officer should resign his commission to join a more lucrative service," d'Array said. "War alone offers an opportunity for advancement. Long periods of peace are very dull and when other countries offer fantastic sums for privateer commanders, it is easy to see why the appeal is often beyond resisting."

"Indeed," James agreed. "But somehow I am surprised to learn that Captain Sephard is Spanish. I don't suppose he has since become a British subject?"

James leaned back tensely, trying to seem merely polite and talkative, masking the sudden hard surmise that made his pulse pound in swift, erratic rhythm.

"I shouldn't think so," d'Array said with no show of interest. "Has he, Miss Luisa?"

Miss Luisa sipped at her tall creamy glass of syllabub and shook her head. "No, why should he?"

"No reason at all," James said languidly. "Brute curiosity, I'm afraid. At the moment everything about Captain Sephard seems peculiarly interesting."

They didn't notice, he told himself exultantly. Neither of them understands what that means. It is the weapon against Sephard that will ruin him. And it drops into my hands like manna from the clouds!

"I share your interest," d'Array said. "Finding Captain Sephard in New York has greatly eased my work here. With-

out his help it would have been difficult for me to do my work without attracting undesirable attention."

"Good for him," James muttered. "Now, Miss Luisa, if you have finished your syllabub, I would like to accept your invitation to see something of New York this afternoon. If you will excuse us, sir?"

"A moment, please," the Count said with a thin, dispassionate voice. "I had a purpose in waiting for you today. May I explain?"

James glanced warningly at Miss Luisa. She lifted her eyebrows in silent question. "Of course," James said quickly. "We are not hampered by a firm schedule. What is it, Count?"

"A British naval cutter made port this morning with despatches from the Caribbean," d'Array said. He smiled at James and his long hooked nose seemed to dip down like an eagle's beak. His eyes were narrowed as always by tension of the muscles underneath them as though he were constantly peering through darkness for an enemy. "The captain of the cutter very kindly brought me a letter from Cap François."

"Did he now?" James said. "Good news, I trust?" He tried to hold his voice level and quiet but something in his tone caught d'Array's attention.

"Yes, Mr. Coult, one might say so. The end of my mission is now in sight. Within a few days, by tomorrow, perhaps."

Miss Luisa flicked a frightened glance at James. He frowned heavily, willing her to keep silence. It was obvious that d'Array had more to say and it would be foolhardy to offer any comment that might give him information he did not already have.

"I am pleased for you, Count, but what does—"

"Very well, Mr. Coult. I am not trying to lay a snare for you. Allow me to finish. The letter sent by the French commandant informed me that six American ships cleared from Statia recently. All loaded with contraband, of course, but one of them also carries munitions, largely gunpowder and rolls of lead. American smugglers often disguise their ships and change their names when entering foreign ports, but I know their true names, and the names of their owners. All are bound for New York, and in view of the fact that the British cutter hailed two of them yesterday, it is obvious that all will make port within a few days."

"And you will have them searched, of course," James said.

"Of course." D'Array smiled again, a mere shadow of an expression. He leaned back in his stiffly padded chair and lifted his wineglass to the light. He sniffed at it suspiciously and put it down with a little grimace of distaste. "I am trying to be straightforward, Mr. Coult. I do not know which ship of

those six is carrying munitions. But I do know that two of them are registered to Coult and Company. Now do you understand why I waited for you and Miss Luisa to return from your cruise?"

"No," James said honestly. "Why?"

"Mr. Coult, my duty is fully accomplished by stopping the munitions trade. I do not feel compelled to furnish culprits for punishment. I put it to you, and to Miss Luisa. Tell me if one of your ships is bringing in munitions and I will assure you that nothing will happen. Beyond confiscation of ship and cargo, of course, but that must be expected."

James lifted a peremptory hand before Miss Luisa could answer. He could almost hear the swift angry retort that quivered in her mind.

"Have you anything more you wanted to say, Count?" he asked coldly.

"Only this," d'Array said with an air of harsh authority. "Coult and Company has agents and offices in France and in French colonies. A formal complaint from me would result in confiscation of those subsidiary companies. A great loss, Mr. Coult. I warn you that it would not be wise to—"

"No, sir," James broke in angrily. "I did not ask for your advice. If you have finished, let me answer. And I am speaking for Sir Ruthven and Miss Luisa as well as myself—"

"If you tell the man he is a preposterous fool," Miss Luisa broke in hotly, "then you are speaking for me."

"I was not going to be so pleasant, Miss Luisa," James said. "But you are that, d'Array, and more. There is no need to detail your stupidity. You offer immunity in exchange for information. We have no information. We seek no immunity. Good day, Count."

D'Array's narrowed eyes moved restlessly between James and the girl and his forehead wrinkled in a hard frown. "I cannot understand what—"

"Of course you can't," James said with an unpleasant edge to his voice. "Good day, Count."

"I wish first to apologize to Miss Luisa, and to you, sir," d'Array said heavily. "My work would have been eased greatly if you had found my offer acceptable. Believe me, sir and dear lady, when I say that I am pleased that my offer is meaningless to you. By tomorrow it will be too late for any such friendly arrangements. I thought it best to present it now for your consideration. You will understand my interest and forgive an excess of zeal. Without a supply of munitions, there can be no rebellion, no civil war. And the future of France depends upon there being no war. Good day, Miss Luisa. Good day, sir."

D'Array rose and bowed deeply, tilting the long scabbard of his rapier high behind him. He marched from the room with the quick, stiff strides of extreme embarrassment.

James stared after him until the outer door banged shut and the sound of d'Array's hard heels diminished in the distance.

"I didn't like doing that," he said, almost to himself.

"What are you saying?" Miss Luisa put down her glass and looked at James in astonishment.

James lifted both shoulders in a shrug of pure helplessness. "D'Array is the only person involved in this sorry affair who isn't concerned with his personal welfare," he said. "I'm sorry I'm not in a position to help him. Or to let him help us."

"I think that's absurd!"

"Of course you do, Miss Luisa," James said slowly. "But you can think that only as long as you can believe the *Lady Luisa* is not carrying munitions. Until we search that cargo, there is little point in discussing d'Array, or any other subject. Shall we go?"

"Go?"

"To the dock, dear lady," James said wearily. "You will have to see for yourself."

◀ CHAPTER 19 ▶

ALONG THE North River were none of the jutting piers that thrust out from the bank of the East River. Here, where the swiftness of the current made any other construction impossible, were only parallel quays. Most were of stone, floored with timber, built out just a few feet from the shoreline, and raised so that a ship could be warped alongside, bow to the hard current, and unloaded directly into wagons. Only a narrow roadway bordered upon the water; behind was usually a row of warehouses whose enormous high doors made storage both simple and quick. Often the terminal walls of the warehouses were extended out to the limits of the quay, making a single, sheltered unit of warehouse, quay and ship. It was such an enclosure that protected the *Lady Luisa*. From the street James could see nothing more than the bare, varnished tops of the ship's masts towering dimly above the warehouse roof. It was a perfect arrangement for

unloading a smuggled cargo, James appreciated, for watchful, prying eyes could observe nothing of interest from either the river or the street.

Miss Luisa directed her coachman to pull up at the entrance marked by an illegible sign that swung from a rusted, crooked bracket.

That was the first word she had spoken since leaving the tavern, James realized. The journey had not taken long, but even so, the girl's rigid, disapproving silence had been growing oppressive. James jumped to the sidewalk before the footman could dismount, and offered his arm to Miss Luisa.

She thanked him with the absent courtesy she would have shown her servant and moved past him to pull at a frayed cable that dangled from a hole pierced in the door. From somewhere inside, sounding hollow and faraway, came the thin, jingling note of a ship's bell.

In a row along the length of the warehouse were high wagon doors, barred with iron straps, but in the one before them, a small, lancet-shaped portal had been cut to save the trouble of opening the wide, heavy door. In the top of the smaller entry was pierced a circular porthole covered with a rusted iron plate. It was this plate that ultimately swung back as James stood fidgetting restlessly beside Miss Luisa.

"Ain't open," a surly voice called out. "Come back—oh, it's you, miss."

"Open the door, please," Miss Luisa said.

"Captain Sephard said not to let nobody in, miss. Strict orders. He didn't say you'd be coming."

"Then fetch Captain Sephard. And quickly. I don't propose to stand out here all day."

"He's gorn, miss. Dunno where. I'll get Mr. Rutherford, shall I, miss?" Without waiting for permission, the unseen man slammed the porthole cover with a sharp clang. A locking bar clattered in its socket.

"Is this common procedure in America?" James asked mildly, "to bar merchants from their own warehouses?"

"Don't be silly," the girl snapped impatiently. "You know perfectly well why we can't allow just anyone to inspect that cargo."

James nodded silently. He did know why, but it was not the same reason Miss Luisa was thinking of. Every American merchant was a smuggler these days, but what was being concealed in that warehouse was not routine contraband (James had almost thought of it as "innocent" contraband) but unlicensed munitions whose discovery might mean hanging for everyone involved.

When the porthole was opened again, only a portion of the big round face peering out was clearly visible, but that little was sufficient for James. His sudden burst of laughter exploded in uncontrollable spasms that left him gasping for breath.

"Tell—tell Uncle—Uncle Douglas to—"

"Stop that this minute!" the girl's voice soared with exasperation. "And you, Rutherford, open that door."

"But, Miss Luisa—"

"Immediately," she insisted. "Mr. Coult knows all about our—our deception. There's no need for you to hide."

"But, Miss Luisa, we're unloading the—"

"I know what you're doing," she said. "Open the door. Any more delay, Rutherford, and you'll be looking for another position. Open it, I say!"

"Well," the man muttered. "If you're sure you know what you're doing—" His slow, thick voice was muffled by the sound of bolts squealing in their sockets, of rusty hinges complaining as he unlocked the small lancet door and swung it open upon a vast, shadowy warehouse.

"Good day, sir," James said cheerfully. "Fully recovered, I trust?"

"As well as can be expected," Rutherford said carefully, looking to Miss Luisa for instructions.

"Where did you get that portrait you let Miss Luisa hang at Braeburn?" James asked curiously. "Not very well done, but a good likeness, I thought."

The heavy old man rocked back on his heels, almost twitching with pleasure. "It was painted as part of the scenery for—now, what play was it? I think it must have been—"

"No matter," James said. "I can see you treasure it properly. You've been an actor, I take it?"

"One of the great Garrick's protégés, sir. Much admired in my salad days. I will have you know that Garrick said—"

"That is quite enough, Rutherford," Miss Luisa said firmly. "You may astound Mr. Coult with your past triumphs another time. I hope you were more successful then than you were at Braeburn."

"My dear young lady!" Rutherford boomed. "I protest! My performance was perfection itself. You must not complain if this gentleman saw through your own deception."

"Your performance was admirable," James said dryly. "But you should not wear a signet ring that could never have belonged to the character you are portraying. But it was amusing, and instructive. I assume you find it less trying to play parts for Captain Sephard than for Davey Garrick?"

"We have not come here to question Rutherford," the girl

broke in. "And I don't share your peculiar notions of humor, Mr. Coult. What cargo have you already unloaded from *Lady Luisa*, Rutherford? I want to see it."

"Well, now, Miss Luisa, I'm not sure if I should—"

"Answer me, please!"

Rutherford plucked at his pendulous lip for a silent moment. "If Captain Sephard was here—" he mumbled uncertainly. Then he seemed to shrug inwardly and absolve himself of responsibility. "We're unloading the after hatch, Miss Luisa," he said. "That cargo is being stored in the second bay of the warehouse."

"Take us there, please. At once."

Rutherford nodded. He pointed a finger toward the rear section of the warehouse where open doors let in a misty light from the river.

James offered his arm to Miss Luisa and smiled when the girl brushed past him quickly. He took three long strides to come abreast of Rutherford.

"What about the customs officer?" he asked curiously. "Don't you have to leave the hatches sealed until he's inspected them?"

Rutherford chuckled softly. "He's been and gone, Mr. Coult. Never takes him more than a minute or two. He runs an eye over the bills of lading and tells us his fee. I always have it ready and waiting. Never any trouble. It's all formal ritual these days, like a court levée."

"You don't find it too expensive, I gather?"

"Not excessively," Rutherford said. "The customs men know we would simply take our cargo somewhere else if they demanded too much. Supply and demand, young sir. It's the law of commerce, as it is of the stage. There is a need for infinite—"

"Please hold your tongue, Rutherford," Miss Luisa said briskly. She moved between the two and walked there stiffly, looking at neither of them.

As they approached the river side of the warehouse, James could see woven cable nets swinging from overhead booms, rising limp and empty when returning to the ship, coming down slowly, fat and heavy when lifted from the ship's hold to the quay. At least twenty men were busy on the quay and in the warehouse, and probably an equal number in the ship, but they worked with hardly any noise other than an occasional low-voiced order or a rare shriek from a bosun's whistle. Smugglers born and bred, James thought. They probably moved with twice the speed of ordinary wharfingers and would have to be paid proportionately.

"In here, miss," Rutherford said uneasily. "Are you sure you want—"

"I'm sure," Miss Luisa said flatly. She marched through the small iron door Rutherford held open.

The bay they entered was designed for the protection of valuable shipments. Even the huge wagon door was made of iron and three steel padlocks dangled from their hasps. Bent-backed men trundled small handcarts up a low ramp from the quay and into the dim interior where other men snatched off their loads and piled them high on battens. Here again, the men worked in almost total silence, save for a low muttered curse now and again.

Rutherford held out his arm to hold them behind the line of access from the quay. In a few minutes the carts that had been filled from one netload had been wheeled inside and unloaded. Then, when they could no longer impede the rhythm of work, Rutherford dropped his arm and let James and Miss Luisa approach the stacks of cargo.

Enough daylight seeped in from the doorway for James to read the outlandish markings on a pile of half-chests against the wall. His eyebrows lifted slightly and he turned to Miss Luisa. The girl nodded and offered a mocking smile.

"Bohea tea, Mr. Coult," she said. "The language is Dutch, if you are not familiar with it."

"I have seen it before," James said. "What's in the barrels?"

"In the trade they are called hogsheads," Miss Luisa said, still smiling tightly with a barely concealed anger. "From the smell, I should say they contained molasses, wouldn't you?"

The smell was rich and heady, almost stifling. Everyone, of course, knew that it was virtually impossible to fill a barrel from a vat of molasses without spilling some, but James had never noticed such an overpowering stench in a warehouse before.

"Smells as though someone had broken open one of the barrels," he said mildly. He detoured around the rack of barrels and bent to inspect a stack of tea chests. All were well secured with straps of iron. He lifted one by its handle to test the weight. Nothing out of the ordinary, he thought, merely what one would expect from a heavy wooden chest with a metal liner filled with compressed tea leaves.

"Satisfied?" Miss Luisa asked with her tight-lipped smile.

James shook his head. "Not entirely. If Mr. Rutherford will bring me a lantern, I would like to—"

"Lantern!" Rutherford gasped. "In here?"

"And why not?" James insisted. "Nothing in here to burn, is there? Or explode?"

"Get the lantern, Rutherford," Miss Luisa said. "I want Mr. Coult to inspect everything that interests him. Fetch him that cargo hook from the wall. Possibly he would like to open a chest or two."

"Quite possibly," James agreed. He reached past Rutherford and took the squat, evil hook from its peg. "And now a lantern, please, Rutherford."

Rutherford swung around on his heel and moving very swiftly for a man of such bulk, grabbed Miss Luisa's arms and pushed her back toward the doorway. "Don't you know what's in them chests?" he whispered hoarsely. "From the way you talked, I thought you knew."

"Show her yourself, Rutherford," James said. He shifted to face Rutherford and let the cargo hook drop warningly over the outstretched arm of the distraught old man. "She'll have to see now. Open one of the chests for her." He twitched the butt of the hook enough to pull Rutherford away from the girl. The man was breathing heavily, his face red and mottled with anger.

"You honestly don't know?" he asked in that hard, whispering tone.

Miss Luisa's eyes seemed enormously large in the dim warehouse. She glanced once, briefly, at James, and rising apprehension stood clear and stark in her expression.

"She still doesn't know," James said in a reasonable tone. "But it's her cargo, you know, so you show her, there's a good fellow."

He pulled Rutherford away, turned him toward the stacked cargo and leaned his shoulder against the man's back, urging him forward.

Rutherford stared at him dazedly. He blinked constantly, as if blinking helped him to see better in the half darkness. "She doesn't know? She honestly doesn't—"

"She doesn't know a thing," James said. "Open a chest for her. Which one? This?" He dragged one off the stack by its handle and slid it before Rutherford.

The heavy, slow-moving man looked at the chest with a long, bewildered stare, then suddenly swung the cargo hook over his head and brought it smashing down at the chest. The hook burst through an iron strap and tore out one corner of the chest. Three more grunting swings and the end of the chest was gone. Rutherford squatted, giving a deep, anguished grunt. He worried at the metal lining until he managed to slide a round metal canister from the chest.

"FFFF" was printed in block letters on the sealed top.

Gunpowder, designated in the French manner as superfine. James knew it would be there, so he felt no sense of

surprise, but actually seeing it gave him a cold twinge. Every suspicion he had felt was proven now.

"Oh, my God!" Miss Luisa said thinly.

"Is it all the same, Rutherford?" James asked. "What's in those barrels?"

"More gunpowder, lead, flints, maybe two hundred muskets. Little molasses spilled over the tops for the customs man to smell. What did you expect?" The man rose heavily and glared at James.

"Just what I found. You intend to guard this cargo very carefully, I hope?"

Rutherford tilted his broad head toward the doorway. "I'll lock it up myself, and post the guards. Don't worry. It won't be here for long."

"I'm sure it's in good hands," James said. "I'll be pleased to say so to Captain Sephard. Thank you, Rutherford." He took Miss Luisa's elbow in a quick firm grip and walked with her to the small door that led back into the warehouse. The girl moved uncertainly with short faltering steps like a small girl walking in terrifying darkness.

"Be quiet until we're out of here," James whispered urgently.

To Rutherford he called out, "Don't take any chances with that cargo. You'd best stand guard yourself." He hurried the girl toward the distant entry.

◀ CHAPTER 20 ▶

ONLY WHEN they were safe in the landau again and driving away from the warehouse did James draw in a long ragged breath. He still held the girl's hand in a tight protective grip. She sat tensely back against the cushions, her back bowed slightly as she half turned from James. It was a strangely moving posture. She looked frail and rather sick, but determined not to show it. She did not answer when James spoke to her, but he could feel the trembling of her body. Then, when a cold wind slashed at them from the river, she straightened abruptly, the spasm past.

Her skin was dead-white, shocked to pallor. Against it her dark hair glistened. Slowly as she lifted her face to him, James could see the heavy lustrous wings of black hair,

parted at the center of her wide brow, then the straight black swords of eyebrows and last the clear bright candor of her eyes.

"I would like to hide," she said simply. "I am feeling sick just now and I wish I knew someplace where I could—"

"It's not your fault," James said firmly.

"But it is," she insisted quickly. "Isaac would never have dared, unless he had felt sure I was a complete, blind fool."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. Anyone would expect you to place an unusual degree of trust in the man you are going to marry. You can't—"

"I'm not going to marry him. I couldn't."

James nodded somberly.

"I can't believe I ever intended to," she said, almost to herself. "I was—very frightened when my father died. Isaac escorted me home. I was all alone, except for him. He had been my father's close friend. They were much alike, actually. When I was with Isaac I could pretend I was with my father again, and I felt—warm and safe."

"With Sephard?" James said incredulously.

"You don't know him. He could be kind, and very gentle, when it suited him. Oh, I know he is often violent, even brutal, but many men are in America. What always impressed me, I think, was his quality of sureness. He is the most self-confident man I have ever known. And he seemed so well suited to America. He fitted here, it seemed to me. My father admired him—the hard hands, the courtly manners, the constant air of challenge. Such men do well here. Isaac explained to me about my father's debts. I was horrified, and frightened. He said he would take care of everything for me. Then later, when he proposed, I didn't even hesitate."

"That's nonsense!"

Miss Luisa looked directly at James for a long moment. "Yes," she said slowly, "isn't it." She squeezed both hands together in a tight, hurting grip. "I must have been mad, and blind. I feel as if I'd just come awake after sleeping for months on end. What was wrong with me? Why did I allow that—"

"That's enough," James said sharply. "You were upset when your father died." James heard himself saying "father" when before he would coldly have insisted upon referring to Uncle Douglas as her step-father. Something had changed between them in the warehouse, he knew. They had 'discovered more than gunpowder.

"It's no wonder that Sephard was able to trick you. He's a plausible blackguard. But if your family had been with you—"

"I have no family. I don't deserve to have any after what I've done. But I didn't know. Can you believe that? I didn't know!"

James took her hand silently, gently, in reassurance. She had fought alone too long, he thought, against too many enemies, real and imaginary, with no dependable friends, and bad dreams to bring her awake in the dark of night, terrified.

"You understand that I'll have to stop Sephard somehow?"

"Yes. But I'm the one who should stop him. I allowed him to—"

"It may mean the confiscation of *Lady Luisa*," James went on. "I'm afraid there won't be much left of your inheritance if that happens."

"It doesn't matter now. I can't believe that I ever thought it did matter."

"Good. There's nothing for you to worry about. I'll stop Sephard. And later we'll settle your father's estate decently. And however it all turns out, you'll be all right. Don't forget you're a Coult."

"I had forgotten. For a long while."

"Yes," James said lamely. "I don't suppose you had any reason to remember. I can't say that Uncle Ruthven has behaved as well as he might, but that's all in the past. Can we leave it there, do you think? And go on to—whatever comes next?"

Her fingers closed tightly on his and she nodded, shyly. "Yes, please. I'd—I'd like that."

"Good," James said briskly. "Now, first I'll have to find Sephard. You'd best return to Braeburn and wait until—"

"No! I want to go with you. I have to see him too."

"There's no need, you know. I can manage Sephard easily enough."

"It isn't that," she said quickly. "I want to see him. Just once more. Now that I know what he is, I want to see him."

"He won't look any different. I wish you wouldn't—"

"Please!"

James shrugged and smiled faintly. He glanced about to get his bearings. "This is the Bowling Green, isn't it?" He stretched forward and directed the coachman to wheel in a tight half circle and drive back toward the Coult and Company countinghouse on Broad Street. "Sepherd's clerk should know where he is. At least, that seems the logical place to begin our hunt."

"What will you do when you find him?"

"I don't quite know," James said. "I have to put a com-

plete stop to his smuggling, and there are several ways to do that. If I could, I would just wave Merlin's magic wand and make that shipment of munitions vanish from the earth." As he heard himself say it, James' face lighted up and he turned an excited gaze to the girl. "And possibly I can do just that. If Sephard will agree to throw that cargo into the river, then no one need know anything about it. No matter what complaints come later from d'Array or the military authorities, there would be no evidence."

"And Captain Sephard would go free? Unpunished? Is that what you want?" Miss Luisa's voice was level, cool with disapproval.

"It's not what I want," James said. "If I could please myself, I'd happily see Sephard hang. But I can't think only of myself. My first interest is Coult and Company."

"Don't you ever think of yourself? Must you always concern yourself with Sir Ruthven's problems?"

"I am also thinking of you," James said. "I want to do what's best for all of us. If Sephard goes free, it doesn't matter."

She smiled then, slowly, almost grudgingly. "But it might be very dangerous for you. If anything went wrong, you would be blamed by everyone."

"It's a risky affair, I know. But if things go well, no one will ever know that shipment of munitions arrived in New York, and that's all I want. It's worth taking a risk for that."

"Don't you ever worry about yourself? I have never seen you when you weren't disturbed because of Sir Ruthven or the House of Coult. What would you do if you had only yourself to think about? You wouldn't even dream of taking such risks, would you?"

James lay back against the padded seat and almost laughed. "I don't know what I'd do," he said. "I'd probably tell your coachman to keep going straight ahead, and drive with you along the river. Then I could talk to you as a beautiful girl instead of a conspirator."

"And if you did? What would you say?"

"What would I say?" James wondered softly. "That I like you more than any girl I've ever met. That I admire your gallantry and spirit. That I have seen you foolish and brave in situations that would have destroyed most people I know. I'd ask you to dine with me this evening and I'd send Crutchfield out scouring the city for flowers and musicians. And I would spend the rest of the afternoon trying to convince you that I was the sort of man you wanted to trust your heart and future to, knowing they would both be cherished as they should."

"Oh." Her eyes lifted in sparkling interest, briefly. Then they dropped. "Couldn't you say it anyway?"

"I could and will," James promised. "But the coachman is about to stop now. We will be seeing Captain Sephard soon and I don't want him to interrupt what I have to say to you. Will you let me talk to him first, please? I want to explain the situation without any heated exchanges, if I can. He will have to help if my plan is to work, and if he's angered he may not realize that I am offering him his only chance to save his neck. Will you trust me?"

"Of course," the girl said in a quiet, strangely subdued tone.

James glanced at her curiously. Submissiveness in her was not normal, he knew. He was pleased, even flattered, that she was willing now to trust him, but he would rather have seen the customary mocking assurance in her eyes, heard the amused, caustic edge of her tongue. But both would return when her confidence was fully restored, he felt sure. After the several severe shocks of the day, it was no wonder that Miss Luisa felt diffident and uncertain, if only briefly.

James dismounted and held his hand for her, watching as she rose and drew herself up erectly in the carriage, towering for the moment with imperious straightness. Only her eyes were unsure.

◀ CHAPTER 21 ▶

THE WIND was cold along the street and the last grey light of the afternoon reflected a watery shimmer from the worn brass plate that read "Coult and Company." Seeing that replica of the tablet that hung outside the London bank brought James a sharp awareness of his mission, of the trust Uncle Ruthven had placed in him. But remembering that, even remembering the serious anxiety that had sounded under Uncle Ruthven's languid tones, did not make James as coldly determined to succeed as it might have done earlier.

The pale, lovely, half frightened face of the girl beside him tended to obscure the remembered vision of Uncle Ruthven, and James knew that most of his concern was now for her. She had been desperately foolish and James would have to be both clever and persuasive to get her free of the criminal conspiracy she was involved in with Sephard. Innocent or not,

she would probably never be able to convince a jury that she had not been an equal partner in the munitions smuggling.

James took her hand briefly in his and bent to whisper. "Don't worry, and don't let Sephard frighten you. I'll manage him."

"I know you will," she said. "I'm not frightened."

James pushed back the door and stepped aside to let her enter first. The gloomy, chill counting-room was brightly lighted now, and a brisk fire puffed thin wisps of bitter smoke from cracks in the stove beside the chief clerk's high desk, even though the business day was nearly done and the Royal Exchange had closed an hour before. As James moved past the girk, he saw the shabby clerk slide nervously from his stool, lifting an ink-stained hand to signal to someone out of sight.

A tall, high-shouldered man came silently to the doorway, padding like a cat in long slouching strides. He was wearing soft hide shoes with beaded patterns on the toes. A sort of native Indian footgear, James knew, though he could not remember what they were called. The man's hide shirt and leggings were fancifully fringed, shiny with grease and dirt, bagging at knees and elbows. That drunken roisterer, Major Robert Rogers, had paraded London some years ago in just such a clownish provincial costume, but even after rolling in a Shoreditch gutter, he had never looked quite as debauched and filthy as this man, whose red-rimmed eyes glared at James with savage contempt.

"This'll be one of them macaronis we hear about, huh, Billings?" the man sneered. He rubbed long dirty fingers across his jaw, making a rasping sound against the stubbled beard.

James let his stick tap lightly on the floor as he surveyed the man before him, lifting his eyes with slow, dismissive boredom from the beaded shoes to the lank stringy hair that fell untended to the man's shoulders. And just as slowly James turned on his heel to face the chief clerk who hovered uncertainly near his desk, licking his dry lips and snuffing through his nose.

"Mr. Coult," the clerk said quickly. "Miss Luisa. How—how may I serve you?" He rubbed both hands together in a washing gesture as if to demonstrate his brisk capacity. His sick, frightened eyes watched James fearfully.

"You can't," James said coldly. "Where is Captain Sephard?"

"But he isn't—"

"Captin' begs ter be excused," the man said behind James. "He ain't receivin' guests terday."

"He will see me," James said flatly. "Tell him—"

The man behind him tapped James' back and when he glanced over his shoulder, thrust a wide-bladed knife only inches from James' face.

"No guests, the Capting said. Now, take yer little doxy and git."

James looked at the big knife with no change of expression, smiled thinly and turned back to the clerk.

"Tell Captain Sephard that Miss Coult and I have just come from inspecting the cargo unloaded from the *Lady Luisa*. We will give him one minute to receive us. Then we leave here to have a word with the military commandant. Do you understand what I say, Billings? No, don't look to this knife-wielding fellow for instructions. Do as I say."

"Yes, Billings," Miss Luisa said in a thin, strained voice. "At once, please."

The clerk hesitated, gnawing at his pendulous lip, his frightened eyes roaming the room for assistance. Then he moved away reluctantly, sidling toward the door as if sleepwalking, keeping James and Miss Luisa in sight until he disappeared into the darkened corridor that led to Sephard's office.

"You got a mighty lordly way with you," the man growled at James' ear. "I reckon you think—"

James took Miss Luisa's arm and walked with her toward the front door. When the girl's back was touching the far wall, James turned quickly, bringing his stick up across his body, gripping it tightly with both hands.

The man stood some six feet away, his knife now held low and out from his hip. He crouched as if the tension of the moment drew him tightly into himself. One foot reached forward in a slow, menacing pace toward James.

"Don't be a fool," James said sharply. "Put away that knife."

"I told you what ter do, and you didn't do it," the man said in a thin, whining complaint. "And you tell me what ter do, and I—"

James twisted the hilt of his stick and slipped the long blade free of its sheath. He flicked the tip of the sword high and cut a vicious circle in the air just in front of the man's eyes.

"Don't move," he said tightly. "And don't try to throw that knife. Let it drop or I'll kill you. Drop it!"

The man stopped, his knife hand almost out of sight behind him. His lips drew back from his teeth in a half snarl and he drew in a long, interminable breath. James braced himself, ready to lunge at the first movement.

"Put it away, Cass. The gentleman is a friend."

The man's eyes wavered from James at the sound of Sephard's voice. His dark, strained face was bloodless, his mouth a taut line. He breathed in a sharp, thin whistle. He looked speculatively at James' long blade, at his coiled posture, then sneered again. He brought his knife hand forward very slowly and flipped it, sending his knife spinning. It struck at James' feet with a thud and stood quivering in the worn boards of the floor.

Moving slowly to control the slight tremor of his hands, James sheathed his blade. He raised one booted foot and stamped down on the knife. The tip of the blade snapped off and the hilt skidded away to the wall.

"You must forgive Cass, Mr. Coult," Sephard said blandly. "He did not understand that—"

"No," James cut in. "I don't have to forgive him, sir. Nor you. We will speak in your office, if you please."

"If that is what Miss Luisa wishes," Sephard said in an easy tone, ignoring the truculence of James' attitude.

"The office, please," the girl said.

Sephard offered his arm, shrugged smilingly when Miss Luisa brushed past him quickly. He ushered James into the corridor and followed at a casual pace.

James stopped just inside the door and put his hat and stick on a table. Sephard went by him to help Miss Luisa to a padded chair. The girl sat stiffly, her back straight, hands locked in her lap, her face held in stern lines. Sephard strolled across to his gold-lacquered ebony table and posed himself under the picture of the Letter-of-Marque Sloop *Unicorn* that he had once commanded. He was again dressed in the elaborate black-and-gold of a Spanish grandee, and the foppish clothes contrasted oddly with his harshly weathered face, his rough scarred hands. He lifted to his toes and lowered again, arching his back, as if glad of any excuse for physical movement. He rocked lightly back and forth on the balls of his feet, a man who would always feel more confident when he was in restless motion.

A sea-coal fire sputtered gently in the grate beside Miss Luisa. On a small table nearby were two long-stemmed Venetian glasses, each with a ruby core of wine that gleamed in the firelight. A thin-shanked clay pipe fitted with a curved amber mouthpiece rested in a saucer, still smoldering.

There was just one door to the room, James realized when he looked around. The only possible hiding place was the corner behind a carved Chinese screen near the desk.

"Tell your friend to join us, Sephard," James said thinly. He propped himself against the small table and folded his

arms. He felt strangely tired, as though his brief contest with the knife-waving ruffian in the counting-room had somehow exhausted him.

"Sir?" Sephard asked.

James pointed silently at the glasses and the glowing pipe.

Sephard's dark face lightened with a quick, appreciative smile. "Of course," he said readily. "There are some people in New York that Mr. Bols would prefer not to encounter just now. But I am sure he will be pleased to renew his acquaintance with you, sir."

"Naturally, Isaac." The short, bulbous man pushed back one wing of the screen and came forward, mincing on tiny slippered feet. His little button mouth pursed in a prim smile and a deep crease pulled across his satin waistcoat as he made a sketchy, strained bow for Miss Luisa. "So very pleased to see my young friend again. And to meet the charming lady who is to be your wife, Isaac."

"No," Miss Luisa said with sharp insistence. "I will not be Captain Sephard's wife."

"Luisa!" Sephard muttered in an ugly growl.

"A pity," Mr. Bols murmured softly with a warning glance for Sephard. "I am afraid I have said the wrong thing."

"You have good reason to be afraid," James said stiffly. "I'm glad you're here, Mr. Bols. It saves me the trouble of sending for you. What I have to say is going to be a great disappointment to you."

Mr. Bols screwed up his fat cherub's face in bewilderment and his round, china-blue eyes rolled comically toward Sephard. "Surely not, Mr. Coult? What is troubling you?" He spoke in a rich, clabbery voice full of guttural intonation, but perfectly understandable and fluent, as though English were as familiar as his native tongue.

"I hope you will listen carefully, Mr. Bols," James said. "I know you are a reasonable man, and Captain Sephard is not. You may be able to advise him."

"Of course. Only too pleased." Bols lifted his pudgy shoulders and turned to Sephard. "I thought you said they were—"

"And so they were," Sephard broke in impatiently. "I don't understand this, Luisa, and I don't like it. Why didn't you keep this prying fool out on your boat until—"

"Because you lied to me," the girl said in quick anger.

"That's enough," James insisted. "None of that is important now. We have both seen *Lady Luisa's* cargo, Sephard, so there is no point in further deception. Let me tell you—"

"Come, come, my young friend," Bols said genially. "Less heat and more light, as your estimable uncle would say. I have always admired Sir Ruthven. Such a sensible man, for

a banker. And I am sure you have the same rare quality. Won't you sit down and tell me quietly whatever it is you wish to tell me?"

Mr. Bols' round face beamed with a rosy smile and he held a chair invitingly for James. James hesitated only a moment before moving forward. There was a strange element of mastery in Bols' manner just now, as though he, and not Sephard, commanded here. The bland, imperturbable smile masked Bols' hard sureness, but when he moved around the table to take the high-backed chair that faced James, Sephard shifted quickly aside, as a servant clears the way for his master. Very curious, James thought, and unexpected. But even so, it wouldn't do to ignore Sephard. The captain must be teetering on the crumbling edge of desperation now, and realizing the failure of his plans, he might be stimulated to some last foolish effort to regain his lost position. James seated himself warily.

"You say you have made a discovery, Mr. Coult," Bols said politely. "What is it?"

It wouldn't do to let Bols dictate their conference, James knew. In some fashion he had to dominate this skillful unshakable old schemer, make him understand that James was offering him the only possible route of escape.

"I have made several discoveries since coming to New York, Mr. Bols," James said carefully. "But I think you would be more interested to hear of the discoveries made by Count d'Array. I am sure you know he is eager to find you?"

"Yes, of course," Bols nodded pleasantly. "I follow d'Array's movements with close interest. For such a young man he is highly regarded by his king. A man to reckon with. At the moment, that is."

"He intends to stop the smuggling of unlicensed munitions from Statia to the American colonies. Do you believe he has the power to do that, Mr. Bols?"

"An excellent question," Bols rumbled deep in his chest. "What would you say, Isaac?"

Sephard lifted both hands shoulder high and turned them down in a peculiarly scornful gesture. He rose high on his toes and stared down at James. "D'Array has a letter from His Britannic Majesty's Secretary of State for the Colonies. It orders all British military commanders to furnish men to seize any ships or property that d'Array identifies as contraband. So I suppose you might say he has the power. If he chose to use it."

"He will use it," James said. "I don't know if you have heard, Mr. Bols, but today Count d'Array received word from the Caribbean that six ships have cleared from Statia

for New York. He knows one of them is carrying munitions."

Bols pursed his lips thoughtfully. "So he has heard that, has he? I didn't know he was so well informed." His eyes turned blandly toward Sephard and remained there until the captain colored and knots of muscle bulged along his jaw.

"He knows," James went on. "And he intends to search all of them. I am surprised you were able to slip the *Lady Luisa* past him. Obviously she made a very fast passage, but how did you get her to dock? I suppose you saw to it that d'Array was distracted and then brought her in before dawn?"

"These details are not important, sir," Bols said easily. "Captain Sephard is a skilled mariner. Please go on about Count d'Array. Why should he be interested in the *Lady Luisa*, Mr. Coult?"

"That's a ridiculous question, sir, as you know," James said. "Both Miss Luisa and I have seen that cargo. Captain Sephard's warehouseman opened a tea chest to show her the canisters of gunpowder hidden inside."

"Rutherford did that?" Sephard scowled.

"Of course he didn't realize you were deceiving her, too," James said mildly.

Bols nodded his understanding. "And now I suppose you are thinking of telling Count d'Array that the *Lady Luisa* has already docked with her—unusual cargo?"

"Possibly," James said. "Since you realize he had power to sequester the ship and cargo, you must also understand why it is in your best interest to persuade me not to tell him."

"That is perfectly clear, my young friend. What inducement had you in mind? No, no, Isaac, don't be foolish. Mr. Coult is entirely right. He possesses valuable information and it is only proper that he should expect to be paid for it. Go on, sir. What do you suggest?"

"Throw the munitions into the river, and I will say nothing to anyone."

Sephard snorted savagely. "By God, I'll—"

"Please, Isaac, I don't want to have to warn you again," Bols said coldly. "You can see how surprising your suggestion is, Mr. Coult. Captain Sephard has a large investment in that cargo, as I have myself. You can't expect us to jettison it willingly."

James smiled thinly. He shot a quick look at Sephard, then settled back with folded arms, and said casually, "Captain Sephard doesn't have a penny invested in that cargo. No part of it is his. Surely you knew that, Mr. Bols?"

Bols lifted a pudgy hand to silence Sephard but he did not look at him. His small button eyes remained fixed on James. He did not seem to breathe. He had a talent for immo-

bility when it suited him, unlike most Dutchmen who could not talk without the waving of hands, eloquent shrugs and stabs at the air for emphasis. It was a cultivated mannerism, James suspected, one aimed at creating uneasiness, for immobility suggests latent power held in check, all the more menacing for being undefined. James found it impressive, as Bols meant it to be, but he held his faint smile, determined to wait until Bols spoke.

But it was Miss Luisa who broke the heavy silence first. "I don't understand that," she said. "Captain Sephard owns one-third of—"

"No," James said flatly. "Sephard owns nothing. Just look at their faces, Miss Luisa. They know what I mean."

"Explain to the young lady, Mr. Coult," Bols said placidly. He put his hands together on the desk, one on top of the other, and waited.

James drew in a slow breath. His earlier confidence was ebbing away under Bols' unruffled scrutiny. The Dutch trader seemed supremely sure of himself, arrogantly so, as if nothing James could do or say would make any difference to his careful plans.

"When the American colonies were first founded," he heard himself saying in a voice gone suddenly thin and strained, "Orders in Council were passed requiring that all merchants trading in or with the colonies be subjects of the British crown. Sephard is a Spaniard."

"Does that mean—" Miss Luisa began.

"It means that he cannot own any share of an American mercantile house," James said flatly. "Whatever Sephard paid for his interest in your father's branch of Coult and here company is lost to him. He cannot even sue for recovery. No portion of the company's assets are his and if he had made any arrangements in the name of the company, those arrangements cannot be legally binding. Is that clear?"

"But I had no idea!" the girl breathed. She turned quickly to look at Sephard. "Did you know that?"

"A tissue of lies, my dear," Sephard said, stiff with anger. "I told you Coult was a clever fellow. He'll stop at nothing, as you can see."

"But let's consider Mr. Bols' position in this matter," James went on quietly. "You have been paid, haven't you, sir? Thirty thousand pounds, my uncle said, in bills of exchange. But since Mr. Douglas Coult is dead—don't look so surprised, Captain. Of course Miss Luisa told me. As I was saying, with Mr. Coult's death, the prime ownership of this branch reverted to my uncle, since Captain Sephard is not qualified as an American merchant, and Miss Luisa, being a female, is

not legally eligible to conduct business affairs. And as my uncle's representative, I warn you that Sir Ruthven Coult will disavow any transactions between you and Captain Sephard, and insist you return the money you have been paid. Unless, of course, we can reach an amicable adjustment between ourselves."

Bols chuckled indulgently. "What a dismal prospect," he said blandly. "But you know that is really a most archaic law you have just quoted. No one has invoked it for a generation of trading."

"But it remains a law," James said earnestly. "And I will see that it is invoked, if I am forced to it. At the very least, the courts will appoint a trustee to operate this branch of the company until all claims are thoroughly aired. And that would answer my purposes quite well."

"You seem strangely vindictive toward Isaac, young sir. Are you truly moved by a passion for legality, or is it something more human? Jealousy, perhaps?"

James flushed and a vein swelled in his forehead. His voice thickened but he held it level. "No, sir. I came here instead of to the authorities because I hoped we could settle this problem in decent privacy. You have involved the House of Coult in your schemes and my uncle is determined to stop you. I don't know what you plan for the future, Mr. Bols, but any trader would be mad to invite my uncle's opposition. Sir Ruthven Coult has agents in every quarter of the world and he would seek you out and ruin you wherever you went. I am sorry that you will lose your profit when the cargo is jettisoned, but you can recover losses in other transactions. Oppose me now, and there will be no other transactions for you. I am completely determined."

"I can see that you are," Bols said with an admiring smile.

"Then I shall—"

"Softly, softly," Mr. Bols said soothingly. "No heat, no passion, Mr. Coult. We are men of affairs, you and I, and we know what makes the world move. Sir Ruthven Coult willingly paid the bills of exchange I received from Mr. Douglas Coult. He was strangely unsuspecting for such a clever man, I thought. And what a pity."

"I don't know what you mean," James said stiffly.

Mr. Bols shrugged. His pale eyebrows lifted in derision. "Sir Ruthven might find it hard to prove he is not involved in this matter of munitions. That is all I meant, sir. The possibilities are obvious to a man of your understanding. We need not labor the point. I am not greatly concerned about Sir Ruthven. Even if I were, I could not alter my plans at this late date. In Statia there are three warehouses filled with arms of all

varieties. The records show that Coult and Company owns them. I am merely your agent. You don't think that thirty thousand pounds worth of munitions could be transported in one shipload, do you? At least six such shipments remain. They must be sold somewhere, Mr. Coult. I am sure you understand that."

"That is another problem, Mr. Bols. We'll consider it another time. I will tell you once more. Send Sephard and his men to jettison the *Lady Luisa's* cargo and I will hold my peace. After that we can consider what further action must be taken. Miss Luisa will sell the New York branch of Coult and Company to Sir Ruthven, and it will be closed. The remaining munitions can be sold somewhere at a decent profit. We needn't traffic in rebellion, sir. I realize that you and Sephard will take a certain loss. But you will still have your lives and freedom, which should be worth something to you."

Mr. Bols' fat hands patted together softly as if in applause but his round sleek face remained impassive, wreathed in habitual, meaningless good humor.

"I understand, Mr. Coult. And I approve of your concern for your uncle's interests. I wish members of my family had your fine sense of loyalty. Essentially we are not in conflict, as I hope to show you." He tilted his head slightly to look at Sephard's dark, frowning face. "Isaac, I think we can spare you now. Aren't you dining with Count d'Array this evening?"

"I'm not going to leave now," Sephard said angrily. He strode, stiff-legged, toward James' chair and stopped in front on him, leaning tensely forward, his left hand tilting his smallsword forward in eager readiness. "I've stomached this puppy's insults for the last time. I won't—"

"But you will," Bols said bluntly. "Don't trifle with me, Isaac." When Sephard whirled to face him, Bols smiled and his tone softened to gentle, understanding admonishment. "And please don't glare, Isaac. We all know you are a magnificent swordsman. But swordplay will solve nothing here, and you haven't the wit for delicate negotiation. I asked you a question. Are you dining with the Count tonight?"

Sephard's taut shoulders trembled with the effort it cost him to control himself. Slowly the tilted sword returned to position. The power that Bols could exercise over him was total, James realized, for he had seen Sephard's eyes, his grim, hating mouth, and he knew the man was quivering with blind rage. Yet, under Bols' cool gaze, the captain's shoulders slumped. He nodded in surly fashion. "Yes," he said in an undertone.

"Splendid," Bols said pleasantly. "Join him, dear fellow. And ask that unwashed ruffian outside to come in here until you return. Then go fetch Count d'Array. It is time we came to an understanding."

"What?" Sephard stiffened. "Bring him here?"

"Exactly," Bols said with a beaming smile. "First, call your wild man, Isaac. I am sure Mr. Coult would like to see him." He crooked a pudgy finger and Sephard came around the end of the desk as if he were controlled by a string. He bent, listened to a brief whisper from Bols, nodded again, and straightened with his narrowed eyes intent upon James all the time. Sephard glanced uncertainly at Miss Luisa. Then he shrugged and left the room, leaving the door open behind him.

James measured the smiling Mr. Bols with deep misgiving. The man seemed unaccountably pleased with himself.

"Why do you want to bring d'Array here?" he asked abruptly.

Mr. Bols shut his eyes and squirmed in his chair until he was more comfortably seated. He opened one eye roguishly and smiled, saying nothing.

"Now, see here," James said awkwardly. "I will not countenance any attempt to—"

"Be at ease, young sir," Bols said placidly. "Ah, there you are, Isaac. Have your man stand outside the door. The poor fellow does smell, doesn't he? And now, off with you, Isaac. I am sure you can think of some excuse to fetch Count d'Array here. Take some good men with you. But quickly, please. Miss Luisa and Mr. Coult will be wanting their dinners too."

James watched as Sephard crossed the room and picked up his laced hat from the desk. The captain placed James' stick in front of Mr. Bols and tweaked the gold hilt sufficiently to show Bols that it contained a hidden blade. The Dutchman smiled at James and brushed the stick back from the desk with a casual gesture. It clattered on the floor and rolled to the far corner.

"You won't need that just now, sir," Bols said mildly. "Off you go, Isaac."

As Sephard turned, Miss Luisa lifted one hand in an imperious gesture and crooked a finger, as Bols had done. Sephard paused, his face dark with angry blood. Then he bent slowly toward Miss Luisa.

James did not see the girl's hand move. At one moment she was sitting motionless and silent, her dark watchful eyes the only sign of life. Then her lifted hand swept viciously around, smacking Sephard with a shocking impact just under

the cheekbone. Miss Luisa tilted her head and smiled dreamily at Sephard.

"Isaac!"

The harsh, peremptory tone of Bols' voice halted Sephard as he lurched forward toward the girl's chair.

"That will do, Isaac," Bols insisted. "We are all waiting for you. Hurry, please."

Sephard was close to murder. James half rose from his chair, drawn by the captain's tense, menacing posture. Sephard's eyes were a madman's eyes, sunk to tiny red glints.

But somehow, even through his blind, insensate rage, Sephard heard Bols, and his fear of the Dutchman was enough to hold him in place. And once stopped, his fury died. He stood in place briefly indecisively, then spun away swiftly and almost stumbled toward the door.

James dropped back in his chair and let out his pent-up breath in a long gust.

"I agree," Bols said thinly, with a trace of nervous laughter. "That was not wise, my dear young lady. Poor Isaac is not the master of his passions, as you can see."

Miss Luisa glanced absently at Bols, then lifted her eyes deliberately to stare at a point just above his head, as though nothing about Bols would merit further attention.

James twisted in his chair to watch as Sephard disappeared down the shadowed corridor. The leather-clad man posted there stepped forward into clear view just beyond the open door. He grounded the butt of a long firearm on the floor and stood in a lazy, insolent slouch, his jaws working incessantly, his thin lips pursed as if he meant to spit. James looked carefully at the firearm and asked, "Is that a rifle?"

The man nodded indolently. His long dirty fingers caressed the slim barrel that was at least a foot longer than the muskets issued from the Tower to British troops. He tossed the rifle up lightly, catching it in the crook of his arm. He turned slightly so that the grooved bore was aimed directly at James.

"I had best warn you," James said when he had turned again to Bols, "that Count d'Array has good reason to believe that a hidden rifleman tried to kill him last night. If he sees this man here, he is not likely to accept anything you say without grave suspicion."

"Don't let it disturb you," Bols said with an easy shrug. His dubious, half closed eyes inspected the slouching rifleman. "He is an atrocious marksman, isn't he? He missed three times, I am told, but I hardly think he will miss at such a short distance. He was highly recommended to me, but—" Bols gestured at the man as if to brush him away.

"However, it will not matter if d'Array becomes suspicious. He will be in no position to complain for long."

"My God! You don't intend to—"

"Of course," Mr. Bols said. "What else?"

◀ CHAPTER 22 ▶

JAMES COULDN'T trust himself to speak; a tight hot band had closed around his throat and he knew that his voice would come out a thin, ludicrous squeak. The monstrous implications of Bols' almost casual comment thrust a sudden, unexpected edge of fear into his mind. He stared at the blandly smiling Dutchman with the frozen fascination of a bird watching a prowling cat.

"You—" He coughed to clear his throat. "You can't mean to—"

"My dear young friend," Bols interrupted smoothly, "let us not worry about Count d'Array until he arrives. In the time we have alone, I would like to direct your attention to another idea."

"No," James said in a strained, unrecognizable tone. "I don't want to—"

"Please, Mr. Coult," Bols insisted in his rich, clabbery voice. "When you came here this afternoon you appealed to me as a reasonable man. I now appeal to you. Let me ask a question, please. Suppose, if you will, that Captain Sephard and I agree to jettison our cargo. What would be the result? How would the present situation be altered?"

"Why—why, that's perfectly obvious," James said hesitantly, disconcerted by the abrupt change of subject.

"Of course," Bols agreed. He leaned forward and nodded approvingly. "With the cargo gone, there would be no evidence to interest the authorities. If none of us talked about it, that would be the end of the transaction. Am I correct?"

James nodded reluctantly.

"Good! So we are agreed. Now let me arrange the situation in another way. Suppose, instead of throwing away the cargo, we make sure that it leaves for its destination before morning. Is that not the same thing? The munitions would be gone. There would be no evidence. And my suggestion has the additional merit of assuring my profit, and Captain Sep-

hard's profit, too. All without loss to you. How does that strike you, sir?"

"No," James said thinly. "I can't agree to that. You know as well as I do that there is bound to be talk afterward. The munitions would still exist somewhere. The presence of that much gunpowder could not remain a secret for long."

"I think it can," Bols said insistently. "You don't seem to realize that the Americans are in desperate need of these supplies. In all the colonies there is probably not thirty tons of gunpowder available to them. You can be completely sure they will not announce the presence of the *Lady Luisa's* cargo."

"No," James said again. "I cannot be sure. I won't take that risk."

"But you don't really care whether the Americans revolt against their King, or not, do you?" Bols asked in a half whisper. "You aren't pulling English chestnuts from the fire, are you?"

"No. I'm surprised the Americans haven't revolted long ago. Basically, I suppose I am in sympathy with them. But I won't permit you to use Coult and Company to promote their revolt."

"You are thinking only of Sir Ruthven, of your family? Your own personal interests are not involved?"

"I was sent here by my uncle," James said stiffly. "I have no right to consider my own wishes until my mission is concluded."

"But it is concluded," Bols said. "My dear boy! Think for a moment. Forget that you and Captain Sephard are on rather bad terms. Forget, if you will forgive me, that the lovely young lady near you is also gravely involved with this problem. Think only of the actual facts, the situation itself. You came here to stop the munitions traffic if you could. You couldn't. Very well. That part of your mission is decided. Further, you wished to keep the House of Coult from being identified with the colonial rebels, for the loss of honor and profit might be ruinous. Now that part of your mission still hangs in the balance." Bols smiled suggestively, persuasively, and sat back, making a pudgy steeple of his fingers.

In spite of himself James was listening intently. Bols was an impressive man at that moment. His round cherub's face seemed to flatten into hard fleshy planes of conviction and competence.

"You are beginning to understand, aren't you?" Bols said softly. "We are together in this, Mr. Coult. Our fortunes run side by side. If one falls, both fall. You see?"

"No," James said. "I don't understand."

"You would like to return to London and tell Sir Ruthven that you have been thoroughly successful, that the honor of your house is still shining, that your New York company is closed and that no unlicensed munitions have been brought into New York by the House of Coult. Of course you want to do that. I understand very well. And you can, my friend! Believe me. I will show you how it can be done. Think of it! Imagine how proud your uncle will be to welcome you home, knowing his trust was well placed, that his favored nephew is a wise and resourceful young man, the very sort of man he had prayed to find for his heir. Think of that, sir."

And the picture had an enchantment, James agreed silently. More than anything he wanted Uncle Ruthven's approval. No, not more than anything, he amended, warning himself.

"Now turn your excellent mind to my small problem, sir," Bols went on persuasively. "I spoke of my investment at Statia. If I cannot dispose of those munitions at a profit, I will be ruined. Naturally I cannot accept that. On the other hand I don't want to sit here in this nice comfortable room and tell you that if I am ruined, I will drag the House of Coult down with me. That would not be friendly, and I wish to be friendly, Mr. Coult."

Under the bland, buttery voice ran the cutting edge of implacable threat and James was chilled to hear it.

"Originally I had planned to ship all my munitions to New York within the next few months. But I will now send them elsewhere, sir. That will be my contribution to our joint venture. Let me dispose of this cargo as I have arranged. By morning there will be no trace left. I can assure you there will be no talk, no scandal, no least suspicion directed at Coult and Company. And I promise there will be no more shipments sent to New York. You can dispose of the *Lady Luisa*, close this office, and return to London, knowing that your wise action has assured the safety and honor of your family enterprises."

James stirred nervously. He could feel a thin trickle of sweat moving along the angle of his cheek.

"Think carefully, Mr. Coult," Bols urged gently. "You have many things to consider. It is a great responsibility your uncle has placed on your shoulders. But he was justified, I can see that clearly. Not everything in this life develops as we would wish, but a wise man can find profit in all things."

James swallowed past a hard lump. He shook his head slowly. "I could not possibly—"

"You are not thinking, sir," Bols said quickly. He wagged a pudgy finger in reproof. "I said that we are together now. And so we are. Thanks to you, I know that Count d'Array is close to making a dangerous nuisance of himself. I had not dreamed he was so well informed. But now that you have warned me, I am able to protect myself. Because of your help, I can do this. Am I clear, Mr. Coult? When d'Array crosses this threshold, he approaches the seat of judgment. What becomes of him depends entirely upon your decision. Yours alone."

"That's—that's ridiculous," James spluttered. "If his life depends on me, he is perfectly safe. I won't—"

"Unless you agree to my suggestion, young sir, you condemn d'Array to death," Bols said softly.

James straightened slowly, his face pale and strained, his voice desperately earnest. "You are a contemptible, cowardly fool," he said with open disgust. "You may have come close to persuading me a moment ago, but no more. I'll have no part of your filthy plans. Either you throw that cargo into the river, or I'll see that you are hunted down and punished. I'll bring the full resources of Coult and Company against you wherever—"

"Sit still! Don't use that tone to me, sir. You seem to forget there will be no Coult and Company unless you join me."

"Join you in a murder?" James said scornfully.

"And what of me?" Miss Luisa demanded in a tone that rivalled James' for harsh contempt. "How do you plan to assure my silence, Mr. Bols? Will you kill me, too?"

James was on his feet before Bols could answer. He strode quickly past the desk and retrieved his swordstick from the corner.

Bols turned to look at him, saw the bared blade slide from its scabbard, and he smiled with kindly derision, shaking his head as he might at the antics of an overwrought child.

"Look toward the doorway, Mr. Coult," he said lightly.

"Damn your rifleman!" James said in a savage tone that was close to a snarl. "Tell him he'd best kill me with the first shot or I'll put a foot of steel in his dirty hide. I'm not going to—"

"You, fellow!" Bols called in a shrill tenor. "Shoot the girl if Mr. Coult takes another step!"

The rifleman shifted one balanced pace forward and swung his long barrel into line. There was a flat deadly click when the sear engaged at full-cock. The sights centered on Miss Luisa in her chair and the rifleman took a slow breath to

steady himself. He was making a soft humming sound in his throat.

Carefully Bols held out his hand. He slipped the sword-stick from James' lax fingers. He fitted it clumsily together and clamped it upright between his fat knees.

"Now let us be calm again, and friendly," he said jovially, as if nothing had happened. "Take your chair, Mr. Coult, and try to behave like a reasonable man. Do you really think I would leave anything to chance? I hate threats and people who threaten me, but I am not vindictive. I admire your fine principles. I wish I could afford them. So I will allow you to reconsider your decision."

Bols held up a thick peremptory hand before James could answer.

"Remember that your answer also affects Miss Luisa. Don't you think you should consult her?"

James was so stiffly locked in position that it took a positive effort of will for him to turn his head far enough to look at the girl. And the mere sight of her erect posture, her dark, blazing eyes, was answer enough. Her brief moment of uncertainty had passed now and the calmly poised young woman who faced him was supremely sure of herself—and of him.

"Please speak for me, Mr. Coult," she said quietly, only a slight tremor betraying her nervousness.

"I don't think there is any need to answer, Miss Luisa," James said. "Even Mr. Bols can see it clearly. Don't let him frighten you. At the moment he seems to hold the upper hand, but even he wouldn't be stupid enough to—"

"I don't intend to harm you, Mr. Coult," Bols broke in with a rumbling, guttural chuckle. "Nor Miss Luisa. I hold no rancor, in spite of your attitude. You and Miss Luisa will join me in a leisurely cruise to Statia when the *Lady Luisa* returns for another cargo. I will see that you are supremely comfortable there for a month or two until I have shipped all my merchandise. Have you ever visited the Caribbean, Miss Luisa? An enchanting world of delicious balmy nights, scented seas breaking softly across pink sand beaches, palm trees and—"

"And how will you explain all that to my uncle?" James asked tightly.

"That will be a trying moment, I confess. But Sir Ruthven is also a trader and after you have returned safely to London, he may be forgiving."

"Not after I have spoken to him," James said.

Bols lifted his fat shoulders in a resigned shrug. "Very

well, indulge yourself in foolishness if you must," he said placidly. "I have done my best."

He placed both hands on the arms of his chair and levered himself painfully to his small feet, grunting with strain. He moved in a slow waddle to the table near the girl's chair, picked up his glass and filled it from the decanter. He sampled the bit of his dead pipe, pouted with distaste and put it down. "If a glass of wine seems appealing, please help yourself, Mr. Coult. Miss Luisa."

He waddled back to his chair and settled down with a comfortable sigh to sip from his glass. His fat cheeks wobbled as he turned to smile benevolently at James.

"A young man is often at the mercy of his passions," he said with a shrewd, measuring stare. "It is not easy for him to retract a decision once it has been made publicly. But possibly I could help you. Is there any question you would like to put to me, Mr. Coult?"

"None," James said heavily. There were a hundred questions that plagued him but he would not give Bols the satisfaction of knowing that. James was tasting the bitterness of unexpected defeat and the dull hopelessness of his voice demonstrated his awareness of that fact, and the self-contempt it induced in his mind.

He picked up his chair by its scrolled back and carried it across to the fireplace, putting it down facing Miss Luisa. The girl looked up and smiled calmly. She turned to stare at the watchful, placid Mr. Bols.

"What have you done to Captain Sephard?" she demanded. "He acts like a jack-in-the-box when he's with you. I suppose you are blackmailing him?"

"Blackmail?" Bols chuckled. "That is an old Scottish term for extortion, is it not? You might call it that, Miss Luisa. Isaac for many years commanded your step-father's privateer, you will remember. Some privateer captains realized that they had not been licensed for piracy, but Isaac was not of their number. I am afraid he has always been greedy. He was seized by the French and would have been hanged if I had not arranged for his escape. I will not mention the port in which he was tried; it is enough to say that a rope is still waiting there for him. A charge of piracy is never forgotten. You can understand that Isaac naturally feels a certain gratitude toward me."

"I should call it fear," Miss Luisa maintained.

"You might," Bols agreed pleasantly.

James turned the back of his chair to Bols and sat, reaching out to take the girl's hand. "He's an accomplished liar,"

he said too softly for Bols to hear. "Don't let him trouble you."

"I'm afraid he isn't lying now," she said in a tone that matched his. "I should have known about Isaac. I should have known so many things. I'm not as surprised as I should be, so I must have suspected all the time, without allowing myself to think of it. I—I am ashamed."

"You needn't be," James said gently. His hands closed warmly about hers. "It's my fault, all of this. I was so sure I could control any situation. I should never have let you come with me."

Miss Luisa shook her head. "You couldn't have kept me away," she whispered. "I think you've done very well. No one could have done more."

"I could have," James said in quiet bitterness. "If I'd only had wit enough to bring a pistol, we wouldn't be in this nasty trouble. I don't know what I can do now. I hope you can forgive me for such arrant clumsiness."

"There's nothing to forgive," she said quickly. "You couldn't have known about Mr. Bols. I think you have behaved admirably."

James could not look at her and hold his voice steady. He turned away, knowing his face was hot and flushed. "Thank you," he said in a low, embarrassed mutter. "I wish I deserved that. I can do better, I think, in the future. At least I can take better care of you. If you'll let me try?"

"Yes."

James swallowed heavily. He drew in a long steadying breath. "There's no time to think of that now. I have no words for what I want to say to you. I have to get you out of here somehow. Maybe when Count d'Array comes there will be an opportunity. If one develops, will you try to hide somewhere, behind the desk, or in a corner where that rifleman can't see you? I wouldn't dare to move if I knew he was aiming at you."

The girl nodded soberly. Her eyes shone with a quick brilliance, but only a calm resignation was suggested by her expression. Her fingers closed hard around James' hand. "Don't think about me. I'll be safe. Do whatever you—"

"Please, please," Bols broke in with a guttural testiness. "I realize you two young people have much to say to each other, but I must insist you do not whisper. We can't have you concerting plans against—"

"Hold your tongue, sir!" James snapped in a sudden flare of anger. "I don't intend to—"

A sharp sound from the corridor silenced James abruptly. A gust of chill air from the river swept into the warm room

and a blurred confusion of boot heels made flat echoes in the hall. Bols swung about to face the door. The rifleman threw a quick glance over his shoulder, then stepped aside, well away from the door.

The first to enter was a scowling, subdued Captain Sephard, who moved ponderously across the room. He pulled his hat from his head and with it indicated Count d'Array who had stopped in the doorway, a roughly clad sailor on either side. His arms were held behind his back and his hat was gone. An empty scabbard dangled at his side. His tightly curled white wig was slightly askew, with the center parting slanted toward his right eye. There was a dark streak of smut on the edge of his chin. But d'Array held himself lithely erect and his eyes were half closed with an air of weary boredom as he surveyed the room.

"Here he is," Sephard said in a surly voice. "Henri, le comte d'Array. His Most Christian Majesty's envoy to—"

"Never mind, Isaac," Bols said sharply. "Good evening, Count. I am delighted you could come so promptly."

D'Array nodded with empty politeness. "Captain Sephard prevailed upon me," he said casually.

"Isaac, you didn't use force, did you?" Bols said in the swift shrillness of outrage. "You didn't—"

"I had to," Sephard growled. "He knew what I was about the moment he saw me. That skinny, high-stomached Ensign of the Royal Irish was leaving when I came in. Delaney, I think his name is. He's the Provost's assistant. I've seen him often. He was with d'Array for an hour before I came."

"That's very interesting," Bols said, "but hardly important. We know Count d'Array has authority to call upon the British Army for assistance. But he has delayed a trifle too long in this instance. Haven't you, Count?"

"A trifle," d'Array conceded.

Bols made a curt gesture and the seamen holding d'Array released him and stepped back a stride, ready to seize him again if required. A vicious looking pair, James thought. But they would look better when swinging on the end of a yard-arm. D'Array tugged his lace cuffs into place and brushed at the sleeves of his coat.

"Good evening, Miss Luisa. Mr. Coult," he said lightly. "I did not notice you in your corner. Have you joined my country's enemies, too?"

"We have not," James said stiffly. "Neither of us has anything in common with this scum."

D'Array's smile was a swift shadow across his mobile face. He turned again to Bols. "A pity I could not find you sooner," he said.

"Do you think the outcome would have been different?"

"We might have made rebellion impossible."

"Oh, come now, Count," Bols said with a hint of laughter in his voice. "Let's not be fatuous. I've done nothing to create rebellion. These Americans are going to revolt whether I help them or not. You must have seen that for yourself."

"Possibly," d'Array said in a mild tone, as if the total failure of his mission meant nothing to him. "But your help will make the rebellion more savage. Because of you—"

"Never mind. Never mind," Bols said hastily. "We have no time for childish debate. Neither of us is likely to persuade the other. What I had in mind was a compromise."

"In what area?" d'Array asked in quiet surprise.

"A simple exchange. I must be assured you will take no action against me. In return I will see you safely aboard a ship for France. By the time you arrive it will be too late for interference."

"Do you mean you would accept my parole?"

"Well, not quite that," Bols said dubiously. "No, it would be best if you remained under my eye until you actually went on board your ship."

D'Array stroked lean fingers along his chin. He pinched at his lower lip, staring at Bols with clinical detachment, as he might have inspected an unknown variety of pig. After a long contemplative moment, he seemed to recollect himself. "Forgive me," he said thinly. "Surely you weren't expecting an answer?"

It was the casual, almost negligent quality of scorn in d'Array's voice that nettled Bols. His round pink face flushed to a stinging crimson and he could not speak. His pudgy fingers clenched on the desk top. A purple vein throbbed along his neck.

"I told you there was no point in dealing with him," Sephard said. "He knows you have to kill him, so why talk about it?"

"Why indeed," d'Array murmured. "Unless Mr. Bols is not as sure of himself as he might be?"

Bols drew his clenched hands down into his lap. He swung his chair around and tilted his head toward Sephard. "I want those munitions moved from the warehouse tonight. When will your customers be able to pay for them?"

Sephard frowned. He shook his head slowly. "They barely had half the money this afternoon. They are all trying to raise the rest. Possibly in a few days—"

"No, you fool! It must be tonight. Don't you know what will happen tomorrow when the British find d'Array has disappeared? Every soldier in the city will be searching for

him. We must transfer the munitions tonight. Do you understand? Tonight!"

Sephard grunted.

"If your customers cannot pay the total amount in cash, we will have to accept notes of hand, deeds to land, mortgages, whatever kind of payment they offer. Find them at once, Isaac, and tell them that—"

"I don't know where they are," Sephard said in surly objection. "Billings, our chief clerk, takes care of all that. And anyway, I told you they were trying to raise the money. They won't be easy to find at this time of day."

"You are a fool, Isaac," Bols said with cold, deliberate scorn. "I cannot trust you with the simplest problem. Very well, I will find them myself. I will take your foolish Billings and find your foolish rebels without your foolish help. Do you think you can be trusted to guard these people while I am gone?"

"Just leave Cass and the sailors with them," Sephard muttered. "I'll come with you and show you where—"

"No! I am sick of the sight of you. I will take Billings and your unwashed rifleman and finish this transaction myself." Bols pushed away from the desk and got slowly to his feet, grunting painfully. He kept his angry face turned away from d'Array as he shuffled across the floor to the door.

He looked back, bracing himself against the open door. His voice was a low, guttural snarl.

"Guard them well, Isaac. If even one of them should escape, I will see you hanged."

◀ CHAPTER 23 ▶

WHEN THE DOOR slammed behind Bols, the two seamen shifted around to put their backs against it. Both folded their thick arms across their chests and fixed dull, staring eyes on d'Array, sure he was the only source of difficulty.

The Count hooked one foot around the leg of a chair, skidded it toward him, swung it to face Sephard and sat, stretching his legs out straight, his ankles crossed. He swung his arms out wide, then locked his hands at the back of his neck. His intensely cold, pale eyes measured Sephard dispassionately.

"Now why did Mr. Bols say that, I wonder?" he said in a musing tone. "Can he actually have you hanged, Isaac? No matter. If he can't, I can."

Sephard's dark face tightened but he held his explosive temper in quivering restraint. He seated himself behind the ebony desk and drew a short, top-hammer travelling pistol from one deep pocket of his coat. Laboriously he inspected the priming. He shut the pan and tapped the barrel sharply to make sure that a train of powder had entered the touch-hole. Then he brought the cock back to firing position and laid the pistol down carefully on the desktop. He moved his hand an inch away. His deep-set shadowed eyes lifted then and his bitter mouth was almost smiling, as if he wanted everyone to know how much he would enjoy dealing with any attempt to escape.

James looked at the gracefully careless posture of d'Array sprawled in his chair, wondering how the man could even pretend to relax at such a moment. Unless something quite unforeseen happened, d'Array would not live through the night. Soon Bols would return, all arrangements concluded. And then d'Array would be taken out and shot as cold-bloodedly as if he had been condemned by a legal court. James felt his fingers tighten on Miss Luisa's hand so that a ring cut sharply into his palm. The girl's poised steadiness was a great comfort to him just then.

They were three to three in the warm, overly decorated room. Three to three, counting Miss Luisa, and James would always count her for the rest of his days. Sephard's nervous and menacing display of his pistol seemed to suggest an uncertainty, despite his superior position. Of course, even Sephard was bound to feel some embarrassment at facing an old friend whom he had betrayed. But Sephard's manner also indicated a certain lack of confidence in himself. Possibly something might be done with that, James thought. He braced his shoulders against the chimneypiece, trying for a careless posture. He cleared his throat softly and when he spoke he was pleased to hear his voice come out drawling and languid, much like Uncle Ruthven's studied tone.

"Your friend Sephard was sentenced to hang for piracy," he said to d'Array. "It was a French court that convicted him. Somewhere in the Caribbean, I would guess. I don't suppose you knew?"

D'Array laughed softly. "No, I hadn't known," he said. "I'm not surprised, though. Poor Isaac has no judgment."

"Bols said he was just greedy," James said dryly, as if Sephard were not present. "And more than a little stupid."

"Quite true," d'Array agreed with a judicious nod. "You

observed the ridiculous by-play with the pistol? I expected him to shoot his foolish fingers off."

Behind James one of the sailors at the door tried to choke back a snigger. Tried unsuccessfully.

Sephard made a harsh sound in his throat, but neither James nor d'Array glanced at him. The Count had immediately understood what he was trying to do, James realized. Just as long as Sephard remained safely behind the desk with his pistol, he commanded the situation. But pricked and goaded to fury, he might leave his point of vantage and expose himself to attack. James smiled quietly at d'Array.

"He's an exceptionally clumsy fellow," he said easily. "He tried to cheat me in a horse race yesterday. You'll remember, d'Array. A stupid trick. Lost him five hundred guineas, but this beef-witted fellow didn't learn a thing from it."

"Yes, Isaac has no mental capacity," d'Array agreed lazily. "I'm willing to lay a thousand guineas that he actually expected his hidden rifleman would kill me last night. Poor fellow. Isaac has his little tricks and I suppose it is not kind to let him know how transparent they are. I recall when we were young men at the Toulon anchorage, he told me of—"

"That's enough, damn you!" Sephard roared. "I'll have your lying tongue out by the roots."

"Nonsense," James said dismissively. "You know perfectly well you don't dare touch either of us. Mr. Bols would deliver you to the hangman if you dared."

D'Array smiled nastily, his silky mustache twitching to a straight line. "Why don't you speak Spanish, Isaac? Or even French? You've been associating with such low characters lately that your English is little better than a costermonger's. Not a gentleman's tone at all, my dear fellow."

"Don't," Miss Luisa insisted in a frightened voice. "Don't! You mustn't do this. Can't you see he isn't able to—" She pulled her hand free and rose from her chair. She took one uncertain step toward the desk. Sephard's reddened, glittering eyes swung to stare at her.

"Luisa! What—" Instinctively, as she reached out toward him, Sephard's hand lifted, open and trembling.

James scowled. "Luisa, don't let that—" He could not say another word. His stomach moved convulsively. He stopped breathing. His throat closed in a spasm that was close to panic. He tried not to stare at the girl's hand. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, it was creeping across the desk top toward Sephard's pistol. The captain was turned to face her, diffidently touching her right hand, searching her expression for a sign that she understood, and did not hate him.

Later James realized that d'Array must have guessed the

girl's intentions even before he did. Everything happened so quickly that he was never clearly sure of the sequence of events. D'Array was much closer to the desk than James and when he brought his arms down in a casual movement and drew in his feet, both the seamen at the door watched him tightly.

A distraction, James told himself. Somehow I'll have to divert them from d'Array for a moment. He pushed himself away from the chimney piece and bent from the waist slowly. He lifted a wine glass from the small table. His fingers felt thick and clumsy. He straightened again, half turning as he reached for the decanter. The polished bowl of the glass slipped through his hand and shattered on the hearth tiles. That brief, sharp explosion was diversion enough. When Luisa moved, d'Array was ready to do his part.

The girl turned quickly, almost starting at the sudden noise. She seemed to incline toward Sephard. Then her left hand darted out. The pistol skidded across the desk top toward d'Array. Sephard's jaw dropped in ludicrous astonishment. D'Array lunged from his chair and snatched up the pistol in both hands before it could fall. He spun away in the same movement, almost dancing, until his back struck smartly against the wall behind Sephard.

"Thank you, Miss Luisa," he said in a quick, breathless voice. "This is much better, I think. Stay where you are!" His harsh command halted the sailors before they could take two steps away from the door. D'Array was so obviously accustomed to instant, unquestioning obedience that the disciplined seamen stopped without thinking, looking in dull amazement at Sephard. Each held a wide, broad-bladed knife low, pointing at d'Array.

James drew the girl away from Sephard before the stunned, unbelieving captain recovered from his shock. The long muscles of Luisa's back trembled under his fingers.

"Luisa! My God, you shouldn't have—"

"I had to," she said in a broken voice. "I had to."

"Yes, dear lady," d'Array said. "It was necessary. Only you could have approached him. Thank God you knew what to do. And now, Isaac, tell your men to throw away their knives. At once!"

Sephard hesitated. His head swung to look at d'Array over his shoulder. Perspiration made his dark weathered face shiny. The Count touched the muzzle of the pistol to the back of his neck.

"Now, Isaac," he said softly.

"You've lost your wits," Sephard said in a strained voice. "You won't get out of here. Damn you, d'Array, you won't

get out of here. The windows are barred, my men are still guarding the door, and I've got six more men waiting outside in the counting-room. How can you hope to get away?"

D'Array looked with speculative eyes at James. His eyebrows lifted in obvious question. James nodded. He led Luisa back to her chair. When she was seated, he walked across the room and retrieved his swordstick from the floor where Bols had left it. He drew the naked blade from the sheath and sauntered toward the door, making every movement slow and deliberate with menace.

"First," he said in an easy conversational tone, "I am going to kill you." James profiled and brought the glittering tip of his sword high in salute to the seamen nearest him. "The gentleman with the pistol will shoot your friend if he tries to interfere." James rotated his wrist and brought the point down in a tight arc.

The sailor's eyes followed the blade and they bulged in his drawn, white face. James almost smiled. In an honest duel, the seaman would probably have leaped into the fight, but this was murder. James could slash or stab with complete safety, protected by the length of his blade. The sailor looked briefly at Sephard, saw no help there, and dropped his knife to the floor. The second knife followed almost immediately. James kicked both of them aside to a point where he could stoop to retrieve them. He brought them back to the chimney piece.

"Excellent, Mr. Coult," d'Array said admiringly. "Such a simple, direct solution. But what now? Obviously it would not be wise to rush for the door if Isaac's men are outside."

"Probably not," James said calmly. He propped his stick against the girl's chair and let his open hand rest warmly on her shoulder. He shifted slightly so that she could not see Sephard's contorted, murderous face. "But I think we may be able to find a way out. At the moment there seems to be no reason for haste. If we cannot get out, by the same token, no one else can get in."

"But we must hurry," d'Array said quickly. "You heard what Bols said. He intends to deliver those munitions to-night."

"And if I do find a way out for us, what then?" James asked. "I suppose you will take a file of soldiers and confiscate the *Lady Luisa* and her cargo?"

"Certainly."

"The *Lady Luisa* is registered to Coult and Company of New York," James said with slow care. "But Coult and Company took no part in the smuggling. I will want a formal, official statement from you to that effect."

D'Array's eyes flickered briefly toward Sephard. James could almost guess what was in his mind.

"Let me explain," he went on earnestly. "Sephard alone planned and carried out the conspiracy to smuggle unlicensed arms into the city. He was masquerading as a partner in the company."

"Masquerading?"

"Exactly. Legally, only a subject of the British crown is eligible to trade in or with the colonies. Sephard is, has always been, a Spaniard. He could never have acted as a legal partner of Coult and Company."

"Ah," d'Array murmured noncommittally. "I didn't know of such a law. Yes, I see your point. That would seem to absolve Coult and Company from complicity, but—" He gnawed at his lower lip thoughtfully, his narrowed eyes never leaving the line of fire from Sephard to the two seamen near the door.

"Why do you hesitate?" James asked, forcing himself to speak calmly. "Don't you believe me?"

Luisa's shoulder lifted under James' hand and he glanced down to see her straighten to a stiffly erect posture, her chin rising to that familiar, challenging angle. "Obviously he prefers to listen to Captain Sephard," she said coldly.

James shook his head. "No," he said. "It's hard for him to adjust to the facts. He knows Sephard is a murdering rogue, but still he can't quite believe it. Tell us, please, d'Array. Did Sephard ever accuse Miss Luisa, or me, of complicity? Not by implication, not by a suggestion conveyed in silence, but an actual, unmistakable accusation. Did he, sir?"

D'Array frowned. "I don't like this—"

"Of course you don't," James cut in brusquely. "No man likes to find out he's being ridiculous. Are you going to answer me, Count?"

Still d'Array hesitated, looking uncommonly perplexed, as if the conversation had taken a turn he could not easily follow. Miss Luisa looked at his thoughtful expression and said scornfully. "He doesn't dare."

"He dares," James said quickly. "He just hasn't made up his mind. He can't decide whether he can trust us. Give him a moment."

D'Array smiled thinly. "You are a sly and clever young man, sir," he said. "And you are right, of course. So much has happened so quickly that I have not yet understood the meaning. But it becomes clear, Mr. Coult. It becomes clear. Would you like to say anything, Isaac?"

Sephard sat hunched in his chair, silent. Suppressed rage drained the blood from his weathered face. James could

feel the concentrated power of the man as he forced himself to sit motionless. Knotted muscles bulged at his jaw, and his prominent teeth were outlined by the pressure of his lips drawn back in a hard grimace.

"I suppose there is nothing for you to say," D'Array went on after a moment. "Very well, Mr. Coult. I will furnish the statement you require. I will even send a copy to the local commandant so that no action will be taken against your New York company. Now, sir, how are we to get out of this room? I cannot wait much longer."

James drew in a long breath. He had not quite accomplished his mission but he had staved off total defeat by keeping Coult and Company from criminal involvement. Luisa's inheritance was probably lost, for most of it lay in the value of *Lady Luisa* and her cargo. But he could see to it that her loss was not troublesome. He tightened his fingers on her shoulder.

"I have been trained as a merchant," he said. "I am not a very good merchant, but it seems clear to me that an accommodation can be reached through a simple trade. Is it genuinely important to you to get out of here quickly, d'Array?"

The Count nodded curtly.

"By now Sephard is reconciled to losing his profit. He knows that the *Lady Luisa* is lost, no matter what he does. Mr. Bols may have time to sell the cargo if he moves quickly enough, but Sephard will never see any share of that money. He has lost, and he knows it. What he is worrying about now is his neck. Sephard is in no position to bargain. But you are, d'Array, if you want to."

"I will not set him free," d'Array said in flat objection.

"There's no need," James said. "Sephard is worried about two different punishments. The French want him for piracy. The British will want to try him for smuggling, and will probably sentence him to hang. But possibly not; such a case is always hard to prove. I think Sephard would be delighted to take his chances with the British, if you offered to withdraw that old charge of piracy. I imagine you could do that, if you wished?"

"If I wished," d'Array said coldly. "Why should I?"

James shrugged. "You said it was important for you to leave here quickly. You can't do that without Sephard's help. But leaving here at once is not vitally important as far as our safety is concerned. Sephard must understand that. We can barricade ourselves in this room and stand off any attack until morning. By then, with the streets crowded with people, there will be no danger. So all Sephard can offer is a safe conduct that will save you some ten or twelve hours.

That is all he can offer and for so little he cannot expect total freedom in return."

D'Array blinked. His narrowed eyes focussed on the back of Sephard's head, reflectively. "But would he accept that arrangement?" he wondered audibly.

James waited until Sephard raised his head. The captain's shadowed eyes gave no indication of what he was thinking, but his lined, ravaged face showed a fierce anxiety.

"I have done all I can," James said directly to Sephard. "Count d'Array will accept those terms, I think. You will escort us out of this building, and remain d'Array's prisoner to be turned over to the British for trial. In return for your help, d'Array will promise to withdraw the French charge against you, which means you will have some chance of living. The decision is yours. One moment!" James held up his hand sharply. "Let me warn you not to attempt to alter the terms. I can tell you that d'Array is by no means enthusiastic. I can see his face and you cannot. Don't try to bargain, Captain. Answer yes or no."

"But will his men obey him?" d'Array asked sharply. "How can I know that?"

"Another question for Sephard to answer," James said. "If he wants to live."

The room was completely silent. Sephard's dark eyes turned toward the two seamen at the door. He studied them for a long moment, then looked at James. "They will do as I say," he said in a low growl.

"And what will you say to them?" James demanded. "Speak up, Sephard. Say it outright or hold your tongue."

"I agree," Sephard said thickly. "If I have d'Array's word."

"What do you agree to? Exactly what?"

Sephard seemed to shrink inside his elegant coat. His strained face clenched in bitterness and his wide shoulders slumped.

"I will escort you all safely out of here. And remain as d'Array's prisoner. If he promises to withdraw the piracy charge the French have laid against me."

"I will give you my oath," d'Array said formally. "Very well, Isaac. I wish you to walk in front of me, please. Move very slowly at all times. We will go down the corridor. From the doorway you will speak to your men in the counting-room. Tell them to leave here and go home. Tell them not to go near the *Lady Luisa* or your warehouse. I want no more trouble, if it can be avoided. When your men have dispersed, we will walk, very slowly, and carefully, up to the Broadway to the commandant's headquarters. Do you understand me, Isaac?"

Sephard nodded sullenly. "What about these men?" he asked, nodding toward the seamen by the door.

"They are to remain here under Mr. Coult's sword until you and I have left the building. Then they may do as they like. If they have any wits at all, they will disappear."

"Do as he says," Sephard said heavily. He pushed himself to his feet, picked up his laced hat and waved his men away from the door.

"You will wish to see Miss Luisa safely home, I suppose," d'Array said to James. "You will want to know what happens tonight, of course. I can find you at your tavern later tonight?"

"No," Luisa said quickly. "Mr. Coult will be at Braeburn until quite late tonight." She rose in a graceful swirl and turned to face James.

D'Array chuckled briefly. "Then I shall give myself the pleasure of calling at Braeburn. And you may be sure I will prepare the formal statement you asked for, sir, and deposit it with the commandant. Be tranquil, my young friend. There will be no scandal. Everything is nearly finished now. In a few hours—" D'Array shrugged confidently.

James touched Luisa's hand gently, then bent to retrieve his swordstick. He bared the blade again, and moved around to open the door leading into the dim corridor. He held his sword low, point to the floor.

"Thank you, d'Array," he said simply. "I'm grateful. Come as soon as you can."

"But not too soon, eh?" the Count said cheerfully. "I shall be careful to make a great clatter when I arrive, shall I?"

James flushed. He tried to frown at d'Array but the Frenchman's bright eyes danced in mischievous amusement and James was forced to a wry grin in response. D'Array slapped his shoulder admiringly as he moved by.

"Close the door behind me and wait a few minutes. Half an hour if your patience can be controlled so long. Au revoir, mes amis."

The broad, dark-coated back of Captain Sephard disappeared into the darkness of the hallway. Then d'Array followed with lithe, wary steps, cocked pistol poised in readiness. James closed the door behind them and placed his back against it. As if responding to an order, the two sailors squatted against the wall in a far corner, dropped their heads and stared morosely, silently, at the carpeted floor.

But Luisa's head lifted serenely and she offered a soft, slow smile that bewitched the room in dazzle.

◀ CHAPTER 24 ▶

LIEUTENANT-COLONEL NIVEN COCHRAN was no Irishman, despite his name. His family had been resident in Kent for two centuries and Colonel Cochran considered himself completely—perfectly—an Englishman. When troops of the Royal Irish Fusiliers had been quartered in New York, Colonel Cochran found himself being daily affronted by the casual assumption that he too was one of those bog-trotting Papists. His seething resentment had long ago passed the limits of sanity and as he rocked back in his padded chair to glare up at the worried young Irish Ensign before him, his embittered, dew-lapped face grew slowly purple, in frightening contrast to the scarlet of his uniform.

To Colonel Cochran it seemed that all virtue had passed from Great Britain with the Restoration. And by virtue he intended no reference to morality, but merely to those fierce warrior's qualities that had made Cromwell's New Model soldiers the masters of England. The slim waist and delicate manner of the tall fresh-faced Ensign were especially offensive to a man who had once prided himself upon being the most effective and dangerous soldier in the King's Army.

But the quiet, watchful presence of Count d'Array, who stood almost lounging near the door, arms folded, eyelids drooping superciliously, tended to restrain the Colonel. He forced his fleshy face to a more benign expression. He snorted to clear his nose before sniffing at the sickeningly sweet bouquet of his glass of port. He downed it in a long swig and leaned back again to belch pleasurably. He smacked his lips juicily, stretched out one hand to strip a few pale raisins from the stalk before looking at the stiffly erect young Ensign again.

The Colonel liked to imagine that the stern blue fire of his gaze was striking terror in the soul of the willowy youngster who stood patiently, waiting for permission to speak. The Colonel would have exploded in apoplectic rage if he had known the Ensign was thinking only that such a dreary, drunken, petty-minded old man should have been decently retired years ago, seeing not a blinding fire, but dulled and watery eyes sunk in moistly pink circles, strangely naked and vulnerable, all the more dangerous for being weak.

Many were the transplanted Irishmen who bragged of their Englishness, unable to find an identity for themselves in either land. The Ensign had known many such and he had learned to restrain himself patiently, compassionately.

The Colonel blinked in slow rhythm, trying to remember why the Ensign was standing there interrupting his comfortable evening.

"But you did find the ship and cargo, didn't you, Delaney?" he asked abruptly. His voice rumbled from his chest with a liquid sound as if it found its way to the surface through deep water. "Found the contraband, and put it under guard?"

"Yes, sir," Mr. Delaney said quietly. "I have left half a platoon on guard. The quartermaster is sending clerks tomorrow to make an inventory. Mr.—ah—" He turned helplessly to look at d'Array.

"Le comte d'Array," the Colonel said. He rather prided himself on his French, in a day when not one Englishman in a thousand could command the language. He rolled the name on his tongue again. "Henri, le comte d'Array. Am I correct, monsieur?"

"The Colonel is too kind," d'Array murmured.

"Count d'Array," Delaney said carefully. "The Count had a prisoner with him, sir. A Captain Sephard. The Count wanted to inspect the contraband himself and he had the prisoner brought along to show him where it was. They were just a little bit ahead of me when we went into the warehouse. We broke down the door and I stopped to post a sentry. When I turned around they were both going into a little room off to one side. I followed right away. Then Count d'Array came stumbling out and fell on his—back. The prisoner had pushed him out and locked the door of the room. What with one thing and another, we didn't have a chance to break down the door for about ten minutes. When we did, the prisoner was gone. Vanished, sir. It was like magic."

"Magic!" the Colonel roared. "You miserable superstitious loon! You're all alike. There's no such thing as magic. Not to a soldier. Why didn't you go after him right away?" He tugged angrily at his wine-spotted neckcloth.

"We couldn't, sir. Not just then. There were about a dozen smugglers in the warehouse and I had to take care of them first."

"Had a fight, did you?"

Delaney shook his head. "No, sir. Not much. They ran. Two of them tried to hold off my men. One of them was wounded. They all—" Delaney swallowed nervously, observing the dangerous tide of crimson rising up the Colonel's neck. "They all got away."

"Got away!" the Colonel bellowed. "Got away! Prisoner gets away. Smugglers get away. What in hell were you about, you clumsy young fool?"

"But, sir, I couldn't—"

"Silence!" the Colonel demanded, beginning to enjoy himself hugely now. "Don't whimper, Delaney. A soldier never whimpers. But God knows you're not much of a soldier, are you? Did you think to search the room where your prisoner disappeared?"

"Yes, sir," Delaney said eagerly. "There was just one other door that led onto the quay. It was locked from the outside with three padlocks. I was in front of the other door all the time, sir. I swear. And I searched every inch of that room myself."

"What damned nonsense. You've let a prisoner escape, my boy." The Colonel rocked back in his chair and glared balefully at the Ensign. "I'll have your commission for that."

D'Array unfolded his arms and pushed away from the door. This had gone on quite long enough, he felt. "Mr. Delaney was acting under my instructions, Colonel," he said in obvious warning. He could not allow this wine-fuddled old bully to ruin a young officer's career out of sheer pique. "You yourself ordered him to obey me, sir."

"You will keep out of this, sir," the Colonel said, shaky with anger. "This matter concerns the Army and I'll permit no civilian to interfere. Mr. Delaney has neglected his duty and he'll damned well suffer for it."

"I shall feel compelled to testify for him if you insist upon a court-martial, Colonel. I think that my word will carry some weight."

Colonel Cochran swelled in his chair, puffing his pudgy face at the sharp note of threat in d'Array's voice. Damned civilians could be troublesome, no question of that. Best to let the issue pass, for the moment. Plenty of time to take care of Delaney later, and this jumped-up Frenchman, too. The cautious counsel of long service held great meaning for the Colonel, but it was some time before he could bring himself to nod in surly agreement.

"I will accept your word, sir," he said in a grudging growl. "Delaney's not soldier enough to merit your concern, but I won't press the matter, since you're so interested. But what about your prisoner? You don't seem worried."

"You are very generous, Colonel," d'Array said. "I am sure that Mr. Delaney's future career will justify your generosity. About Captain Sephard, I am not overly concerned. Mr. Delaney alerted the Provost guards before we reported to you. There is no place for Sephard to go. He cannot leave on any ship. I suppose he might hide in the countryside for a time,

but not for long. I am sure your men will find him soon, Colonel."

"Not my responsibility, Count," the Colonel said flatly. "Don't accept any responsibility for any prisoner that hasn't been surrendered to me. Find him if I can, of course, but I'll take no responsibility."

"I understand, sir," d'Array murmured, successfully masking the harsh contempt he felt. "Now, if you will permit me, I will take my leave. I wish to prepare my report while the details are still fresh in my mind."

The Colonel placed both big hands squashily on the table and grunted as he began to lift himself to his feet.

"Pray do not trouble, Colonel," d'Array said hastily. "I am already sufficiently honored by your courteous assistance. I shall give myself the pleasure of reminding my government of your kindness."

"My duty, sir," the Colonel wheezed. "Any time, eh?"

"May I also remind you of the statement I left with your adjutant, sir? If you will be good enough to forward copies to Whitehall with your endorsement, I am sure no further action will be necessary. The House of Coult is clearly blameless in this matter."

The Colonel nodded without looking at d'Array. "Good night, Count," he said heavily.

"Good night, Colonel. Mr. Delaney." D'Array pulled open the door, bowed and backed into the anteroom.

Colonel Cochran sat unmoving until the door had closed behind d'Array. With one finger he drew short ellipses through a puddle of wine on the tabletop, staring at the developing pattern with his tongue pinched between his teeth. A faint bubbling sound erupted from his nose. After a long, sourly contemplative moment he roused himself, straightened and pawed for his decanter. He lifted it to one side and slid a folded paper toward him. The bottom of the decanter had left a moist crimson ring across one corner. The Colonel fumbled it flat and smacked down a huge soft hand to hold it open. He peered at the carefully written text, snorting as he read. He rubbed a thumb across the seals of the military witnesses affixed to the lower edge. Then he reared back in his chair and blew out a contented gust.

When he looked up at Delaney his eyes were almost hidden in his scarlet, secretive face.

"That Frenchie tell you about this?" he asked suspiciously.

"I was one of the witnesses, sir," Delaney said.

"You and my adjutant. Right?"

"Yes, sir."

With calm deliberation that was marred only by the tremor of his hands, the Colonel brought up the open paper and tore

it across. He placed the halves together, squaring the corners neatly, and tore it again. He repeated the process twice more, watching Delaney closely all the while.

He placed the stack of torn paper on the table and smiled ferociously at the Ensign. "Don't see any statement now, do you?"

Delaney swallowed painfully. He knew what was expected—demanded—of him, but he could not do it. That bloody-minded, miserable old man had destroyed d'Array's statement merely because the Count had challenged him successfully. For a grimly apprehensive moment Delaney guessed what lay in store for him, too, when d'Array was safely out of the Colonel's way.

"Sir, innocent people are going to—"

"Innocent! Damn your insolence, sir! Who says they're innocent? Some damned blackguardly Frenchman who walks in here with a scrap of paper from some nincompoop in Whitehall? What in hell does he know about it? I'll decide the matter, sir. And I'll make what recommendations seem proper to me. Is that clear to you, Mr. Delaney?"

"Yes, sir," the Ensign said miserably.

"I want to talk to these Coult's. Mr. James and Miss Luisa. Bring them to me in the morning. And not too damned early, either. Midday will do. Bring them under guard. And this time, Mr. Delaney, if they try to get away from you, kill them."

"Yes, sir."

The Colonel leaned forward, propping himself on both elbows, dabbling his blunt fingers in the mound of torn paper and scattering the bits across the table.

"This is old Ruthven Coult's brood," he said softly. "Sir Ruthven Coult, the great man on 'Change. He's a friend of the King, did you know that, Delaney?"

"No, sir."

"Yes, he is. Walks right in St. James's Palace whenever he likes. Money opens all doors these days, Delaney. We won't hurt Sir Ruthven. Too many people in Government owe him favors. But he's going to have a bad moment, I promise you. He'll wriggle out. He always does. But he's going to have a bad moment. And maybe he'll remember the bad moment I had when he kept me waiting half the day before he could make up his mind to refuse me a loan. He'll remember, all right. I'll see to that. I'll make damned sure he remembers Niven Cochran."

The Colonel glared up at the still, appalled stance of the young Ensign. His mottled, sagging face lifted in a harsh smile.

"Who is this James Coult? Old Ruthven's son, I hope?"

"I—I think Count d'Array said he was a nephew, sir."

"Too bad. Wish he was his son. Make a big splash in London. Sir Ruthven's son sent to prison for sedition."

"But, sir, he didn't—"

"I say he did," the Colonel said blandly. "And so do you, Mr. Delaney, if you know what's good for you. Now get out of here, you lack-brained idiot. I want to see you back here by midday with two prisoners. In gyves, mind you." The Colonel made a moist sound with his lips. "In gyves, or dead, by God!"

Delaney saluted swiftly and backed to the door. His wide young eyes watched the Colonel as the savage old man reached again for his decanter. I won't do it, he was thinking. He can't make me do a thing like that. I won't seize innocent people and—

But before he had opened the door, he knew that he would.

◀ CHAPTER 25 ▶

IN THE CONVEX lid of a polished silver dish James could see the mirrored reflection of Luisa, upside down and shimmering with the misty tones of enchantment. He kept his eyes fixed on that fragile image as long as the butler was circling the table with his wrapped wine bottle.

Throughout the lengthy, over-elaborate dinner he had found himself drifting in hazy reverie, staring with an entranced, almost blind stare at the radiant girl, aware that he was being a species of damned idiot but unable to turn his eyes away. A few hours of rest and devoted attention from her maid had worked wonders for Luisa. The wind-tossed hair was burnished, silken again, lustrous against bare shoulders. Her spray-spattered gown and sanded slippers were replaced now by pale glossy satin, panels of lace. A narrow circlet of pearls held a small medallion softly against the hollow of her throat. But best of all in James' mind was the recovery of poise and relaxed ease. The taut, haunted shadow was gone from her eyes. And so, James was particularly pleased to see, was the thin edge of mocking contempt which had never before been very far beneath the surface. Amusement twitched constantly at the corner of her mouth, but James accepted his position as lady's jester, accepted it and

welcomed it. With time he would grow easy as he became more familiar with the new sensations that were now upsetting his usual composure. But it was too early to expect any improvement. Infatuation was his lot for some lengthy time, he suspected. And when the butler withdrew to the sideboard for a quietly whispered consultation with the footman, James was convinced they were hard put to repress waves of sniggers.

To hell with butlers, he told himself defiantly. He lifted his eyes and stared again, flushed with foolishness and wine and love and the nonsensical misgivings that have always plagued men at such times.

For nearly three years he had been playing the part assigned to him by Uncle Ruthven. He had adopted the proper postures, been suitably vain, arrogant, supercilious, even domineering, and done it rather well in spite of his wretched self-consciousness. With so much practice he should have been more confident with Luisa. But the part had never fitted him, he realized now. A more devil-may-care, rollicking fellow would have shifted his chair long ago, taken Luisa's hand as James longed to do. Such a fellow would never find himself separated by the white expanse of an enormous tablecloth, numbed by his own ineptitude.

"You are so solemn, James," Luisa said quietly. "I should think you'd be bursting with pleasure at your success."

James gulped quickly and reached for his wine glass. After a sip his voice came out steady and low, though it did sound slightly odd to his ear.

"I am, I suppose," he said hesitantly. "I'm pleased everything turned out reasonably well for Uncle Ruthven, But I can't take credit for anything, much as I'd like to. If it weren't for you and d'Array, we'd still be sitting back in that room, staring at Sephard's pistol and wondering what was to become of us."

At the mention of Sephard's name, the brilliance seemed to fade from Luisa's eyes, and James wished he had been born with wit enough to guard his tongue.

"I—I've been thinking," he said clumsily. "About Sephard, I mean. He'll have to stand trial, of course, but I don't see how the authorities will be able to make out much of a case against him. There simply isn't much proof available, unless Bols or someone else testifies against him, which isn't likely. I don't think you need to—"

"I'm not concerned about him," Luisa said promptly. "It is kind of you to try to reassure me. You are really very kind, James. But it isn't necessary. I don't even feel bitter or vindictive toward Isaac. I simply don't feel anything at all. Now, please, let's talk of something else until Count d'Array

arrives. Will you take your port in the drawing room with me? I—I don't want to be alone this evening."

James agreed with a ridiculous eagerness and at her signal, almost kicked his chair across the room in rising. The watchful butler caught it before it could topple. Imperturbably he preceded them to the door and held it until they had passed. Not a flicker of expression was visible on his face, but James could almost feel the raucous laughter that rumbled below the surface of that disciplined attitude.

James perched himself uncomfortably on the leading edge of an apricot satin couch, in constant danger of sliding off the polished surface. He did not move until the butler had placed decanters in the wheeled coaster beside him, arranged bowls of nuts and raisins about the room, presented a rack of glasses. With an admirably straight face, Luisa dismissed him. She turned away from James briefly, moved to the seat of a harpsichord that stood between two windows. She settled herself with a quick swirl of full skirts and poised her hands lightly above the keyboard.

"Shall I play for you, James? Do you like music with your port?"

James nodded helplessly. He reached out his hand to lift the silver stopper of a decanter, held it absently in his fingers while he looked around for a glass.

The long curtains of an open window rustled as if a sudden gale had caught them. A harsh metallic voice was only slightly muffled by the heavy fabric.

"Play a requiem for the gentleman, my dear. Play it slowly. He is about to die."

Luisa's hands struck the keyboard, sending a discordant jangle through the quiet room. An involuntary tensing of muscles brought James to his feet with the first sound of that voice. Even before he emerged from the shadows, Sephard's presence was beyond question. James stared, open-mouthed, incredulous, as the burly figure of the captain moved into clear view. He was hatless, his ornate black-and-gold clothes disheveled and dusty. His eyes were shadowed until he came into the pool of light cast by a single candle on the harpsichord. Sephard rested both forearms on the glossy wood and leaned forward. Then James could see the still hot light of death in his eyes. In one hand Sephard gripped what seemed to be a mate to the pistol he had lost earlier. Or possibly the same one, James thought, if he had been able to wrest it from d'Array.

D'Array, James wondered numbly, what of him? He must have said it aloud, for Sephard snorted.

"When I last saw him he was lying flat on his back on the

warehouse floor. You recall the warehouse, Mr. Coult? A smuggler's warehouse. With a smuggler's secret route under that floor that leads to the street. You realize I couldn't stay with d'Array, don't you? I have too much to do."

"Isaac, you can't—" Luisa almost rose from her bench before Sephard swung the muzzle of the pistol toward her.

"Don't move, Luisa. You won't come safely close to this pistol. I don't intend to kill you, but I will if you force me to it."

"You won't kill anyone," James said with more assurance than he felt. His hand tightened around the bulbous stopper, clenching so hard the metal facets cut into his fingers. "You aren't a total fool, Sephard. At the moment the only charge against you is smuggling. It's just possible you might not be convicted. But if you kill either of us here, you'll hang. You can't possibly get away. You'll hang as sure as—"

"Shut up!" Sephard snapped. "You don't think I actually believed d'Array would let me off that piracy charge, do you? I know my old friend too well. He will inform the commandant as soon as it suits his pleasure. He's not—"

"He's a gentleman," James said bluntly. "He gave you his word. He won't break it. There was a time when you knew what a word of honor implied. Don't you have any memory of that time?"

He's too far from me, James was thinking. Four long steps at least, and then there's the harpsichord between us. I could never reach him before he shot me. James took one almost imperceptible step forward, shifting his weight as slowly as he could.

Sephard sneered at him. His broad, darkly weathered face lightened with a momentary amusement. "I'm not impressed by your sermon, Mr. Coult. And I'm not impressed by your sneaking little steps toward me. Do you intend to charge me, sir? Please do. You'll make a better target if you're closer. Come forward, Mr. Coult. Don't be timid. Come forward, sir."

"Don't, James," Luisa said sharply. "*James—*"

Her sudden shriek startled even James. Sephard could not resist the impulse to look at the girl, however briefly. And that small moment of inattention served James well.

He took a long gliding step forward with his left foot and swung his arm around with the smooth whiplike motion of a bowler striding down a cricket pitch. The knobbly metal stopper of the decanter swept toward Sephard in an upward, curving motion. Where it might have struck him, James could not guess. Sephard flinched away at the last moment and

fended the missile with the hand that held his pistol. He stumbled back into the heavy curtains.

James followed his bowling stride with a swift step, then lunged over the harpsichord, sliding across the top on his chest, hands clutching for Sephard.

His right hand closed on Sephard's throat, his left on the long thick curtains. And when Sephard roared and shoved violently away from the window, James was dragged to the floor after him. The bulky curtains came down, pulling a thick, lance-like rod with them. In the admirable confusion that followed, Sephard thrust his pistol up high, instinctively trying to keep it clear of the enveloping draperies. James rolled over on top of him, saw the pistol close by his nose, and snatched it from Sephard's hand.

The captain exploded under him like a netted tiger. He growled with an insane fury that was more frightening than his threats had been. James tried to push free, holding the pistol against his side, but the same clinging, endless lengths of curtain that had aided him earlier were now a hindrance. His left arm was pinned under Sephard's chest. The captain gripped it tightly and rolled toward James.

James felt both of Sephard's broad hands shift position and lock around his throat, sinking deep into his flesh. James pounded the pistol, panicked, as savage now as Sephard himself, aiming for the captain's head. He struck again and again, and each time felt the muffling curtains pad his blows. A bursting streak of red brilliance exploded in his brain. James could feel himself weakening under Sephard's choking fingers.

Then, miraculously, Sephard let go. His iron-hard grip relaxed and James was able to draw in a quick, sobbing breath. Sephard's hands moved to James's shoulder, exploring through layers of heavy cloth. They seized tightly around the wrist of the right hand and slowly bent the pistol up, away from the floor.

One of James' boots was braced against the wall and he expended all his remaining energy in kicking away. He felt Sephard's hand slip, then clutch again. The pistol exploded with a dull, empty sound, shielded by layers of fabric.

Above him, Sephard sighed. He drew in a long shuddering breath and relaxed very slowly, as if he were suddenly too exhausted to struggle any longer. He let himself down to the floor with what seemed to be deliberation. His head was pillowed on a thick fold of curtain. His dark staring eyes fixed on James' face with no expression. He sighed once again. Then he died, still staring at James with open sightless eyes.

◀ CHAPTER 26 ▶

EAGER, WILLING HANDS lifted James to his feet, brushed at his coat, tweaked his cravat into place, led him stumbling to a chair. He sank back, exhausted and gasping, against the cushion. A purplish haze drifted in thick senseless patterns before his eyes and a roaring pulse pounded in his head. He could not swallow, no matter how he turned his head.

A slim long-fingered hand moved dimly before his eyes, holding a wineglass. James leaned back and tried to sip from it. Only a few drops went down but those few were enough to loosen his throat. He coughed and sat up, pushing the glass away.

"Thank you," he said in a harsh, thin croak. "I'm all right now."

He looked up at Count d'Array with no sense of surprise. He watched the Frenchman return the wineglass to the waiting butler and make a covert gesture toward the windows.

"Wrap him in one of the curtains and take him to my carriage in the drive." D'Array noticed James' intent gaze, and half smiled in response. "The Provost guards have been searching for Isaac. There will be no trouble about his death, I assure you. Leave all in my hands."

Two liveried servants helped the butler remove Sephard's draped body, all of them working with a silent despatch that reminded James of the smugglers he had seen unloading the *Lady Luisa*.

"A terrible moment," d'Array said softly. "I wish I had arrived a few minutes earlier. Isaac was my friend once. I trusted him. Too much, I'm afraid. It should have been my hand that removed him. I'm sorry it fell to you."

James shook his head weakly. "Mine," he said simply, thinking of Luisa, of his Uncle Douglas whom he had never seen, of his Uncle Ruthven who had assigned the responsibility to him. It was fitting that it should have been James who settled the matter.

A small, pinched-faced maid in an enormous white cap backed away from the couch near the fireplace and beyond her James could see Luisa bringing herself up erectly, brushing her hair back quickly with that familiar, graceful, ges-

ture, lifting her chin with an air of brisk challenge. She waved the maid from the room.

"It was best this way," she said, quietly firm, as if she too understood. "Isaac was—was our problem."

D'Array nodded slowly. "He was my friend once," he said in a tone of mild regret. "One should be able to weep at the death of a friend. I hope someone will weep for him. I cannot, though I much admired him when we were boys." He crossed the room toward James, sat on a nearby chair and leaned forward intently.

"Isaac escaped from me at the warehouse," he said.

James nodded. "A hidden passage under the floor, he said."

"Probably so. We might have followed him more promptly, but some of Isaac's men were in the warehouse when we arrived. Most ran, but some—some stayed to fight for a brief time. One of them was badly wounded. Bayoneted. His friends carried him away. He was not caught by the soldiers, but he was badly hurt."

"Yes?" James said incuriously, rubbing his bruised throat.

"The young Ensign and I went to report to his commandant. I then returned to my tavern and set myself to compose a report to my Ambassador. I was coming to see you later, but I thought it best to prepare my report first. You understand?"

"I suppose so," James murmured. "It's quite all right. As it turned out, we didn't need—"

D'Array interrupted with a peremptory gesture. "Two men carried a third into the room next to mine at the City Arms Tavern. One of the town's doctors was called to treat him. The two men vanished and the landlord swears he would not recognize them. They were Liberty Boys, of course, and the landlord is obviously frightened of reprisals. The wounded man is lying in that room now. The doctor says he will probably not live through the night."

"One of Sephard's men?" James asked. "Why tell me?"

"No," d'Array shook his head. "Yours. I do not know his name, but I saw him often on the *Earl of Halifax*, and later in New York. A small, thin-boned man, built like a jockey. Very independent, often impudent. A Scotsman, I believe."

"Crutchfield," James said in a hoarse whisper. "You don't mean Crutchfield?"

"Your servant," d'Array said. "Yes. I am sorry, my friend. He was in the warehouse with the others. Probably Liberty Boys inspecting the munitions. The soldiers could not tell him from the smugglers. He stood against them with no weapon at all, and he was bayoneted."

"Who did it?" James demanded. "Tell me who it was! By God, I'll see him hanged for it! Tell me, who was it?"

D'Array spread his hands expressively and shrugged. "One of the soldiers. Young, frightened boys led by a young, frightened Ensign. It was not their fault, my friend. They were trying to do their duty in a confused situation. Don't fret yourself with thoughts of vengeance. Would you like to see your man? I can take you to him. I have a carriage outside."

"No," Luisa said sharply. "We'll take my coach. You have no room for James, Count. Ord! Ord!" she called to the butler. "Have horses put to the coach at once. Hurry!"

James shoved himself to his feet, holding to the back of the chair until waves of dizziness had passed. "You—you needn't—"

"I am coming with you," Luisa said firmly. "Please don't argue, James. I'll send for Doctor Mullen. He'll know what to do."

"It was a terrible wound, dear lady," d'Array said gently. "Nothing can be done for him. Not by doctors."

James staggered to the door, grateful for the support of d'Array's hard thin shoulder.

◀ CHAPTER 27 ▶

THE ROOM in which Crutchfield lay was a small windowless cell meant for servants' quarters. A vile-smelling tallow dip cast a thin yellow glow that did not reach to the soot-streaked ceiling. From the doorway James could see only a motionless, sheeted mound lying on a narrow flock bed against the wall. There was a shallow metal basin shoved carelessly under the bed, half full of blood and water. Blood-stained cloths were strewn around it.

Behind James the landlord lifted a lighted lamp overhead. Then he could see Crutchfield's face, pale and gaunt against the grey pillow. His thin bony chest sank with a long exhalation, lay perfectly still for an incredible time, then began the long struggle for air once more.

James knelt and took Crutchfield's hand in his. There was blood caked on the fingers.

"Callum?" he called softly. "Callum Crutchfield, can you hear me?"

Crutchfield's dry lips parted in a ghost of a smile. He waited until he had drawn a full breath before trying to talk. "Aye, laddie," he said in a thin whisper. "Aye, Jamie, I can hear you."

"You'll be all right now, Callum," James said, making his voice cheerful and sure. "Miss Luisa has gone for her doctor. He'll set you right in no time."

The corner of Crutchfield's mouth twisted but he did not speak. His fingers shifted slightly in James' hand. Dried blood flaked from them like old paint.

"I'm leaving behind a mort of money," he said after a long pause. "It's wrapped in me old boots. See that the little chambermaid at the Queen's Head gets it, eh, Jamie? Maybe she can buy her brother free of the Lobsterbacks. Will you, Jamie?"

James could not answer for a moment. When his voice was under control, he said, "I'll see to it, Callum. And I'll give her double that amount the day you walk out of this room a well man."

"Do it, Jamie."

"I'll do it."

"Tell your uncle I'm downright sorry."

"For what?"

"Told me to look after you. Be thou faithful unto death, he said. Trusted me. I forgot. Went off—off on my own—"

"No reason you shouldn't. You've taken excellent care of me, Callum. Like a good friend. My uncle will be grateful to you. As I am."

The landlord's heavy shoes made a rasping sound on the bare floor when he shifted position. The lamplight wavered. Then the light drew away. James turned. Luisa was standing in the doorway, hesitantly, her eyes wide with horror. A bulky man wrapped to the eyes in a heavy greatcoat stood there. James motioned the doctor forward and moved to the head of the bed to give him room to examine Crutchfield.

"Don't," Crutchfield said.

"But I have to look at you, my man," the doctor said. He looked old and tired and very impatient. He snatched the covering sheet from Crutchfield and stripped it down. A wad of bandages covered his body from the ribs to where the legs began, wound round and round and cinched with a blanket pin. A patch of blood had seeped through the heavy folds. It made a bright pattern something like a man's head.

"Jamie, don't let him." Crutchfield's fingers gripped hard.
"But he has to—"

"Jamie, my guts are hanging out! Don't let him kill me altogether, lad. I'll be gone soon enough anyway."

James looked up at the doctor. He had a long pair of scissors in his hand. He held them up and shrugged.

"Not much point in—"

"Get out of here," James said angrily. "Get out of here, damn you. Get out!"

He drew the sheet up over Crutchfield's chest again and tucked it in at the sides. He heard the doctor moving across the room but he did not look at him.

"Thank you, Jamie. Thank you."

"What happened, Callum? What did they do to you?"

"A shower of red-coated bruisers came charging at us. We couldn't do anything against them, but they used their bayonets anyway. One of them damned near gutted me. Twisted his stabber after he'd gigged me. Grinning, he was. Grinning and—"

"By God, I'll—"

"Leave it, Jamie. He'll get his own guts pulled out soon enough. I'm—I'm only sorry I can't be here to see it. I wanted to see what was going to happen. It's a grand land, this, Jamie. It has the fine fierce scent of the Highlands during the '45. It won't be a long time now. Maybe you'll be here to see it for me."

"I'd like to," James said absently. Then he realized he meant what he said. He would like to see the explosion that was clearly coming to New York.

Luisa knelt beside James on the dusty floor. She held out a small silver flask to Crutchfield. "Would you like some brandy?"

"Thank you, my lady," Crutchfield said with a shake of his head. "I've no more stomach to put it in."

"I'll wipe your face, shall I?" Luisa dabbed her handkerchief with brandy and touched it gently to Crutchfield's drawn white face.

"That's lovely, miss," Crutchfield said. "Just lovely. She's a monstrous pretty lady, Jamie. Have you noticed?"

"I've noticed, Callum."

"Bring a pretty dowry, too, I shouldn't be surprised. You could do worse, Jamie. Yon Braeburn's a fine house, for a country house in the provinces."

"I know."

"You should speak the words, Jamie. It's time you were—"

"I've spoken them, Callum."

"Ah." It was a long sigh. "I wish you well, both of you. It's a load off my mind, I can tell you."

"You are so sure she has taken me?"

"Aye. There's no reason to doubt. You're a much better man than you've had the chance to show, Jamie. London's not a good place for a man to grow up. You'd do better here, I'm thinking. You're too honest and simple for London ways."

"Too simple-minded, too."

"You'll not talk yourself down to me," Crutchfield said with a trace of heat. "I've watched you well for years and I know what I've seen. Simple, I said. Simple, I meant. None of the nasty, twisted little notions like most of the gentry. You belong at Braeburn, Jamie. You cannot have the Scottish one. You'd do well to take the provincial one."

Crutchfield was taking quick short breaths now and James was afraid to let him talk any more. He was sweating heavily in the chill room. His face was pale and his lips seemed dead white and very dry.

"It all—all came out well for you, Jamie? You got the munitions, and did what your uncle sent you to do? It's all well?"

"I did what I came to do, Callum. But it didn't turn out well. I don't know what I should have done, but—"

"Dinna fash yersel', Jamie. Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning. Not many of us ever knows what's best. Look how long it's taken me. A wasted life, you might say, except for the '45. Until the end. Until the very end. It'll come to you, too, Jamie. Hold a light rein and let your heart guide your horse. Don't try to be clever, laddie. It's not for you."

"No, I'm not clever."

"You're something better than clever, and it's made me proud to see. Make my politenesses to your uncle. He's far too clever for any man, but he's good enough. For London, that is." His fingers tightened with a quick, painful clutch. "I'm sorry to die. Just now. I don't want to die just yet. I wanted to see—"

"You aren't going to die."

"Not for a little while. Two or three minutes."

His face was waxen now, and glistening with sweat. There was no sound but the slow rasp of his breathing.

"Jamie?"

"Yes, Callum."

"Stay at Braeburn, lad. London's no place for you."

"All right, Callum."

"And tell your uncle I'm sorry."

"I will."

"He'll know."

"Yes."

Crutchfield turned his head slowly to look directly at James. His eyes drifted to Luisa and he almost smiled.

"Monstrous pretty," he sighed. He closed his eyes.

James could feel the fingers begin to slide from his hand.

"Hold hard, Callum. Hold my hand."

"Don't touch me."

"Callum."

"It's bad luck. Bad luck to touch a dead man. Good-bye, Jamie."

Crutchfield opened his eyes wide and stared at the dingy ceiling overhead. His thin lips moved but James could hear nothing. Then Crutchfield closed his eyes again. He sighed once, deeply. Then he stopped breathing. It seemed as if he'd gone peacefully to sleep, except that his thin chest wasn't fighting for air any longer.

Luisa began to cry softly. James reached out. He took the small flask from her limp hand and held it to her lips.

"Drink it."

He corked it after she had taken a sip and put the flask on the bed beside Crutchfield. Then he got up and lifted Luisa to her feet.

◀ CHAPTER 28 ▶

THE DOCTOR was gone but the landlord was still waiting in the hallway. He lowered the lamp and rubbed his eyes. He eyed James with a peculiar, watchful sort of caution.

"Thank you for giving him a place to rest," James said.

The landlord breathed a relieved sigh. "Pleased to do what I could for the poor fellow."

"I'll make arrangements for him tomorrow. Leave him where he is till then."

"Of course, sir. I'll lock the door. Not a soul will disturb him. But, sir—"

"Yes?" James turned. He held Luisa back from the staircase. "What is it?"

"There's a—a gentleman waiting to see you. An officer from the Provost's office. He's just downstairs in the—"

"No, he's right here." Count d'Array came forward from the open door of his room. "I asked Ensign Delaney to wait with me until you were—finished."

"Yes," James said vaguely. "Thank you. I'm finished."

D'Array's room was well-lighted, almost blinding by contrast. James led Luisa inside, moving with a strange, heavy stride. He almost collided with a large table. He had seen it in time, known he should avoid it, but somehow he hadn't been able to control his movements surely enough. Luisa guided him gently toward a chair and James lowered himself into it carefully, moving with the slow deliberation of a very old man. His arms hung at his sides and he stared down at the red-carpeted floor with dull, unseeing eyes.

"Mr. Coult," a strange young voice said quickly. "I have to inquire whether the wounded man in the next room was one of the smugglers my men surprised in a North river warehouse earlier this evening. Count d'Array has told me he wasn't, but it is my duty to ask you."

"What?" James blinked and looked up. It was a long moment before he understood what the young officer had said. "No," he said thickly, "there's no wounded man in that room. He's dead."

The young officer fidgeted nervously. He turned his gold-laced hat round and round in his fingers. He did not meet James' intent gaze.

"Ensign Delaney is the officer who came with me to the warehouse tonight," d'Array broke in sharply. "One of the smugglers was wounded while escaping, and hearing of a wounded man here, Mr. Delaney felt compelled to investigate. You understand. Of course it is preposterous to think that your body-servant could be involved in such activities. After all, sir, Mr. Coult and his men haven't been in New York long enough to know that a rebel faction exists here. And too, you must remember that Mr. Coult fought with the fugitive Captain Sephard tonight. But for him, Sephard would have escaped again."

"I know, Count," Delaney said timidly. "I am sorry, Mr. Coult. You understand that I had to inquire."

"Do I?"

"Mr. Coult's servant died this evening, sir," Miss Luisa said quietly. "He was an old, devoted friend. Mr. Coult is in no condition to—"

"Of course, of course," Delaney said hastily. "Apologies, my dear lady. Mr. Coult. Very sorry to intrude at such a sad

moment." He backed clumsily toward the door, almost tripping as one spur caught on the carpeting.

James watched him gravely, speculatively. This was the officer whose untrained young soldiers had murdered Callum Crutchfield. This—this spindly boy, this pink-cheeked, awkward lout. James could have snapped his spine with his bare hands. And what good would that do Crutchfield? James could employ the weighty influence of Coult and Company to make such a clamor that this boy-soldier would be tried for murder. And what good would that do? James stared up blindly, feeling within himself a bitter anguish and a helpless conviction of inadequacy.

Delaney's thin-skinned young face burned a fiery embarrassed color under James' steady cold-eyed scrutiny. He was convinced beyond any shade of doubt that Mr. Coult's servant had indeed been the smuggler wounded at the warehouse. But Ensign Delaney did not want to pursue his investigation one step further. A sharp, unmistakable warning shone clear and menacing in James' pale, impassive eyes. But young Mr. Delaney was not frightened of James; he was fearful of what he might learn about himself. He turned away and fumbled uncertainly for the doorknob.

The door opened into the room and Delaney had to step forward to get around it. He paused in the entrance for a wavering, irresolute moment, his eyes lowered, obviously unable to reach a decision.

"Well, sir?" d'Array demanded briskly. "Is there anything more you wish me to do?"

"No, I suppose not," Delaney said indcisively, then, as if the words spilled out of their own accord, "Yes! Yes, there is," he went on swiftly. "You can get your friends out of New York before morning. If they're still here then, I'll have to arrest them. Colonel Cochran's orders."

"What did you say?" D'Array's voice thinned to a harsh whisper. "Arrest them? What for? I don't believe you."

"It's true, Count," Delaney said miserably. "Colonel Cochran tore up your statement. He's going to charge Miss Luisa and Mr. Coult with sedition. Because the *Lady Luisa* is registered to Coult and Company. And now that Captain Sephard is dead, there's no one to refute him."

"But they were not involved," d'Array said hotly. "I told Cochran they were innocent. I swore to a formal statement, witnessed by—"

"By the Colonel's adjutant, and by me. But we are both under Cochran's command, Count. We can't do anything for you. The statement doesn't exist any more. Cochran destroyed

it. If you make another, he'll destroy that too. He is determined to arrest them."

"But why?" d'Array said insistently. "In the name of heaven, why?"

Delaney fidgetted, keeping his eyes turned from James and Luisa. "Colonel Cochran was greatly embarrassed by Sir Ruthven Coult some years ago. He's a drunken, evil-minded old devil, and he's set on making Sir Ruthven squirm by persecuting his family now he has the chance."

"But he has no chance," d'Array said with cold sureness. "I will see to that. I will repeat my statement to his superiors in London. No action will be taken after that, I assure you."

Delaney nodded without looking up. "Possibly not, sir. But it will take six weeks for you to reach London, six weeks for word to return here. And probably six months before Government can decide what to do. All that time your friends will be in gaol. Maybe they will still be in gaol. Colonel Cochran hinted that he would be pleased if I had to kill them to keep them from escaping. It's possible that he might insist upon some form of trial here. In that case, I think you know what the verdict would be."

"The man must be mad!"

"Yes, sir. I think that is quite likely."

"He must know his career will be ruined. I'll see him cashiered."

"I doubt if he would care, sir. His career was pretty well finished before he came here. No really promising officer would have been sent to a provincial backwash like New York in the first place."

James heard every word said by the apologetic young officer at the door, and understood him clearly, but he felt no response in himself. He seemed to be caught in a full, unthinking lethargy, unable to move or speak without incredible effort. Beside him, Luisa stood in a stiff, frozen posture.

Only a scant few minutes had elapsed since Crutchfield had died, but with him had died much of the past, and James was still numbed by the new, unaccountable world about him. Something false and pretentious had ended for James, ended with such a shocking suddenness that the meaning and definition of the change still eluded him.

Luisa's voice was almost unrecognizable with tension. "Are you really serious, sir?" she asked abruptly. "Will Colonel Cochran actually dare to arrest us on a charge he knows is fraudulent?"

"Yes," Delaney said in a mumble of misery. "He has ordered me to produce you by midday. Manacled."

"He is mad," d'Array said flatly.

"Yes, I think so. If your friends are not in the city tomorrow, he might think better of it. You might find some way to bring him to his senses, Count."

D'Array nodded grimly. "You may be sure I will." He frowned heavily at the young Ensign. "But how am I to intercede without letting your Colonel know that you have told me of his plans?"

Delaney flushed. The brim of his hat bent perilously under his taut, nervous fingers. "I—I hope you will not do that, sir. It would mean my commission, and probably prison."

"That's obvious," d'Array agreed. "And why have you dared such punishment to warn us? What motive stirs you, Mr. Delaney?"

"I don't know," Delaney muttered. He shook his head as if his actions often bewildered him. "It's—it's so damnably unfair! That miserable old brute likes to hurt people. He likes it! I don't understand how a man like that ever managed to stay alive so long. But then I don't understand anything about the English, and I don't want to try any longer. My commission is all I have in the world and until I can get permission to sell out, I'll have to stay in the Army, and keep out of trouble, if I can."

James pushed himself heavily to his feet. He found his hat on the table where Luisa had placed it. He clamped it under his arm. He turned slowly and moved with short aimless strides toward the door, his thin, strained face set in the dull fixity of a sleepwalker.

"James!" Luisa came beside him quickly, looking to d'Array for assistance.

The Count gestured for Delaney to step aside. He held the door open for James, taking him by the arm casually as he almost stumbled.

Delaney shifted warily, almost fearfully, as James approached.

"Thank you for all your help, d'Array," James said in an empty voice. He walked blindly through the door into the darkened corridor.

D'Array hurried Luisa after him, whispering urgently. "He is all right. Don't be concerned. I have seen this happen in battle. A man often becomes numbed for a time. It soon wears away. But stay with him and watch him carefully. I will send a message to Braeburn when I have talked to Colonel Cochran. Until then, you and Mr. Coult must go away someplace immediately. Can you manage that?"

"Yes, I can manage." Luisa nodded determinedly. She snatched up her cloak and hurried down the shadowed stairs behind James.

◀ CHAPTER 29 ▶

THE DIM, brocade-lined interior of the Coult carriage smelled lightly of roses from the pomanders hung over each of the doors. James slumped against the cushion. He let Luisa take off his hat so he could put his head back. She lifted out an articulated footrest and swung both his feet up. James sighed and closed his eyes. It had been a strange day, full of strange sights, and he was tired.

Beside him Luisa sat upright, swaying to the motion of the carriage. She did not touch James, though her hand was only an inch from his on the padded seat. Her eyes never left his face. She sat very quietly, trying to choke back a vague, undefined fear. Somehow the serene detachment of James' manner was more frightening than any frenzied activity could have been. He seemed to have withdrawn from all concern. "Dear God," she prayed silently. "Speak to him. Just once, speak to him and let him hear."

Such a long day, James was thinking. A lifetime ago he had been breakfasting at the Queen's Head while Crutchfield muttered baleful Biblical nonsense into his morning whiskey. What had happened after that? A visit to the Coult and Company counting-house, of course. Then a pleasant cruise upriver to a secluded little island. Back again to the Queen's Head, and again to the counting-house. Then to Braeburn and—but where had Sephard come from? James wondered suddenly. Of course, the warehouse. He had forgotten about the warehouse and the *Lady Luisa*. And Sephard had afterward appeared at Braeburn. Why? What had brought him to the house so late in the day? Why was he leaning across the harpsichord, smiling in such a tight, threatening way? What was he saying? What was he holding in his hand?

The carriage lurched in a deep pothole and James was thrown hard against the side. His head struck the panel with a solid thump. He straightened himself and put his feet squarely on the floor.

"Clumsy way to sit in a carriage," he said in a normal tone.

"James," Luisa breathed. Her eyes widened with a sudden access of hope. "James, are you alright?"

"Of course, my dear. Thumped my head, that's all. Silly to sprawl about in a moving carriage. Where are we bound?"

"Oh, James, can't you remember?"

Remember? James thought. What was there to remember? They had been at Braeburn together. Then Sephard appeared. Then Crutchfield—

"My God!" James said in a voice that broke suddenly. Tears came heavily and his shoulders shook in a spasm of grief that caught him completely unprepared. He could do nothing to stop the spate of tears that rolled down his face, nor to ease the racking shudder of his chest. His breath came in thin, painful gasps. Luisa's hand touched his cheek gently and her handkerchief, brandy-scented and familiar, blotted the tears. She whispered to him, comfort without words, a quieting murmur of love.

And as abruptly as it had come, the storm passed. James pushed himself back in his seat, still struggling for breath, but almost in control of himself now. He used his huge handkerchief as a towel across his wet face. He waited until his breathing was coming more smoothly before trying to talk, but even so, he had to speak in short gasps.

"Never—done that—before," he said, keeping his shamed face turned from Luisa. "Can't imagine—what got—into me."

"My dear, my dear," Luisa said brokenly. "Don't apologize to me. I loved you for it. How many men can cry for a friend? How many would want to?" She carried his hand to her cheek, pressed it warmly, turned its palm inward and curled his fingers to fit around her face as she kissed him. Her eyes were brilliant sparkles in the dimness. James gave a strangled cry that seemed to tear from inside his chest. He pulled her savagely close and held her tightly as the carriage rumbled over the pitted road.

It was a long time before either of them were composed and serene again. The scent of Luisa's hair, the softness of her lips, the complete unity that they had reached in such an explosively short time, made James a little giddy when he straightened after a wild series of lurches.

"Not a safe way to sit in a carriage, as I said before," he said in a voice that shook slightly.

Luisa smiled. Her hand stroked his mouth with a cool touch.

"Please," James whispered. "We have to think, and I can't think, if—"

Luisa shifted an inch away, braced her back firmly against the cushion. "We have all our lives, haven't we?" She said contentedly. "There's no hurry."

"We must first make sure we have something left of our lives," James said with a grim edge to his voice.

"Do you remember everything, James?"

"I remember. I was just—I don't know. It was like being struck on the head. I was dazed for a time, but I was perfectly conscious at the same time. I even remember the brave, embarrassed Mr. Delaney."

"Yes, he was brave, wasn't he?" Luisa said. "He was risking everything just to warn us."

"We'd best try to put his warning to good use. What do you think we should do?"

"Whatever seems best to you, James."

James allowed himself to take her hand, but he stoutly directed his gaze out the partly curtained window. "I don't want to run away," he said tightly. "But we can't sit still and let ourselves be arrested."

"It wouldn't really be running," Luisa said quietly. "Many men have found it expedient to remove themselves for a time until their friends could intercede for them."

"I know," James admitted slowly, "but—" He gnawed at his lower lip for a moment. "I want to think about it. There must be another way. I'm damned if I'll let that insane old brute send me running like a whipped dog. I've done nothing criminal, and I won't let him—"

With a quick, fearful wisdom, Luisa silenced James with a finger against his lips. A decision once stated is often hard to change, she knew. "Think about it," she said softly. "I'm so tired, James. I'll nap for a moment, please. You think about it."

She tucked her feet under her skirt on the wide seat, kicked off her slippers and rested her head against James' shoulder. Her eyes closed in a pretense of uncontrollable weariness and she tried to breathe in long, measured cadence. In a brief moment the pretense of sleep had passed to reality. James lifted his arm and drew her head gently down to his lap. He braced one foot hard against the rest to give her added support. He brushed the hair back from her sleeping face.

Slowly, in rhythm with Luisa's quiet breathing, James found his thoughts quieting, too. He had to make a decision, and quickly. But that was no excuse for striking dramatic postures or mouthing warlike phrases. Cold-blooded reason alone could help him now.

And he must also consider Luisa. A decision palatable to

the James Coult of yesterday might not be possible to the James Coult of tomorrow. And in that, there was no loss, he felt.

For most of his life James had been accustomed to other people making the important decisions for him. The same was probably true of every young man in his position, but because of it James had to admit that he was sadly lacking in the routine devices and considerations for decisive action. Still, in mind and spirit he was as well equipped as most, he thought. He lacked only experience, and that lack would soon be remedied.

As a boy, newly bewildered by the complexities of London, James had learned to apply a magic question that had often pointed him toward a useful answer. As before, again he asked himself: What would Uncle Ruthven do?

What would you do, Uncle?

And as before, clearly seen in James' mind, Uncle Ruthven lifted his beaked rapacious nose from his wineglass and leaned back, crossing his legs, nesting his glass in both hands against a dazzle of waistcoat. His eyebrows cocked in tolerant amusement and his voice came slowly, drawling with that familiar note of spurious languor.

—I would try never to forget, dear boy, that one's first duty is to survive.

—A fat lot of help that is.

—Run, you young jackanapes. Your Uncle Douglas ran when Billy the Butcher swore to have his head. Are you so different from Douglas, so much better?

—Of course not, but—

—But what?

—You were one of six brothers—

—What has that to do with it?

—Let me finish, sir. Please. Five of you went north to join the Prince in the '45. You stayed behind. Don't blow me out of the water, Uncle, I'm not being critical. But you did stay behind and that fact is very important now, I think.

—Indeed. How is it important?

—I was thinking of my father, not of Douglas or the other three brothers who were killed at Prestonpans, or even of you. My father went north too. He worried and debated, you told me. He tormented himself with his own doubts, but finally, reluctantly, he went.

—So he did, the fool. He was the best of us all, but he forgot the first requirement: To be useful a man must survive.

—Maybe not, Uncle. Maybe not. I've never contradicted you before, have I? But it seems clear to me that what

you have just said is nonsense, sir. I say that respectfully. I invite you to reconsider your statement. Many a man has found that his only moment of importance, of genuine meaning, has come to him at the same time that he ceased to worry about survival. Callum Crutchfield died tonight. By his own judgment his life had been worthless (except during the '45) until he found himself in New York. Maybe he tried too hard to make a place for himself here. But Callum was never a man for moderation, you'll remember. He committed himself totally and—

—And he was killed for his pains. Nonsense, Jamie! There may be men with a taste for martyrdom. I have never known one. Every man dies alone, hating the prospect of dying. Who says otherwise is mad, or lying. Don't trifle with your own life, Jamie. A mistake once made in such a game can never be corrected. Now, be sensible, there's a good fellow. You've found a lovely girl who for some reason seems content with you. Bring her home, Jamie. Let me declare a gala season for you. She'll love London, Jamie. You know she will. She's full of life and sparkle and wit. She'll be our reigning beauty. I'll see to that. Just be sensible now, my boy. Take yourself off somewhere for a few weeks until I can straighten things out. Then you can come home in triumph. I'm really very pleased with you, Jamie. I gave you an impossible commission and you managed it as well as I could have myself. I'm very proud indeed, my boy. I want you home beside me.

—Thank you, sir. But I don't know if—

—Don't shake your head at me, Jamie. Come home.

—I'm not going to run from that arrogant maniac. I'm damned if I'll run.

—He's no maniac, my boy. According to the standards current in the British Army, Colonel Cochran is probably considered a splendid officer. The Duke of Cumberland was considered a fine officer, too, but every sensible Scot that had the chance ran from him after Culloden. Billy the Butcher, we called him, and he left his stamp on every man of his Army. All of them are much alike, Jamie. You can't fight them all. Now come home like a sensible fellow. Just find a hole for a few weeks until—

—No. I won't. I don't know what I'm going to do, but I won't run.

—And you dare not fight. My God, boy, you aren't thinking of fighting?

—I—I don't know.

—You're just upset because Crutchfield was killed. I can see that. He was a dependable man. Even I found him quite useful from time to time. But no one asked him to stick his

head into the hornet's nest. It isn't your responsibility just because he was foolish enough to get himself—

—He was gutted, Uncle. Like a lamb being dressed for market. Nothing could be done for him. He just had to bleed to death.

—I'm sorry, of course, sorrier than I can say. Know how you must feel dear boy. But he was asking for it, you know.

—He had a bright scar on his cheek too, Uncle. He was standing in the wrong place when an officer wanted to pass.

—Now, see here, Jamie—

And the chambermaid at the Queen's Head, what about her? Remember her, Uncle? I don't even know her name, but I'll never forget that her brother was flogged and thrown into gaol because he dared to interfere when some of the King's soldiers wanted to rape his sister.

—Now you're being sentimental, my boy. Shows you've a gentle turn of mind. I like that in a young man. Too much bloody-minded brutality these days for my taste. But don't overdo, eh? There's nothing quite as nasty as soldiers in garrison. But they do worse in their own country, don't forget that, Jamie.

—I'm not forgetting anything, Uncle. Just now I was remembering three men who came and sat on the edge of my bed and listened politely while I killed the living hope inside them because I was commissioned to do it. With the munitions from the *Lady Luisa* they would have been in a position to make Colonel Cochran and every English soldier watch where he stepped in the future. I ruined those men, Uncle.

—Of course you did, my boy. And did it splendidly too. Can't have every jumped-up little merchant deciding when to organize a rebellion, can we? They would have ruined the House of Coult, Jamie, don't forget that. Captain Sephard stole the money he used to buy munitions, he swindled my brother and lied to your young lady, time after time. It was he who ruined those precious Sons of Liberty, not you.

—I wish I could believe that. I blame myself.

—But you saved the House of Coult, Jamie. Colonel Cochran is just indulging in a fit of senile peevishness. He knows he can't make out a case against us now. You saved us, Jamie.

—Peevishness! Is that what it is? Yes, I saved you, Uncle. And I have been branded a traitor by Colonel Cochran. By that same peevish Colonel. I intercepted a shipment of munitions that would have meant real power in the hands of the Liberty Boys. When I did that, I saved Colonel Cochran's position, his career, and possibly his life. And what has he given me in exchange?

—The reward every Englishman gives to fellows like Scots and Americans and other low forms of life. The back of his regal hand.

—Is it amusing to you, sir?

—Only mildly amusing, my boy. I've endured every variety of English gratitude. Nothing surprises me, except seeing other people surprised.

—Then laugh at me, Uncle. I'm surprised. I'm shocked, too, if you want to know. I'm sick to my soul.

—Laugh at yourself, Jamie. But don't be fool enough to let any Englishman know you resent his arrogant nonsense.

—I am a fool, Uncle. I always have been, I think. Never more than when I tried to make myself into the clever young man you wanted for your heir. Tonight Crutchfield told me I should never try to be clever. I won't try any more, Uncle.

—Jamie! Think, boy. Don't go off half-cocked.

—I'm not going off at all, Uncle. I'm still thinking. Can't you be more helpful?

—I've told you everything I know, my boy. Everything I've learned in a busy lifetime. Not a bad lifetime, Jamie. Comfortable enough, full of the good things of the world, even reasonably useful, in a manner of speaking. Live, Jamie. That is the essence of the secret. Above all: Stay alive.

—Yes, I want to stay alive, sir. I have to think of Luisa.

—There's my boy! You're being very sensible, Jamie. It's stupid to challenge the King's majesty these days. It's too powerful a force.

—The hell with the King's majesty. It's been challenged more than once. And by God—

—So it has. The men who challenged it are dead.

—Not all, Uncle. Not all. Prince Charles Edward didn't die, though a lot of better men did. Oliver Cromwell didn't—

—You won't mention that name in my presence, sir!

—Sorry, Uncle. My tongue ran away with me. I was merely trying to point out that rebellions against the King's majesty have sometimes been successful.

—They'll hang you if you try it. You are the last of us, Jamie. You and Luisa together. If you throw your life away, you throw mine with it. Think, Jamie! Don't decide anything until you are very sure of your ground.

—I won't, Uncle. Thank you for your help.

—I wish it could be more. Since you left for America, I have been lonely, boy. Too much time for thinking. I have been wondering if my life might not have been better in some way if I had gone north with my brothers. Maybe I should have gone. Then I might understand you, Jamie, and be able to help. You're chasing a will-o'-the-wisp and it's bound to

lead you into trouble. I know it will, Jamie. No. No, that isn't true. I don't know. There's no man living who actually *knows*. But I'm afraid it will, Janie. Be careful, boy. Be very careful.

—Yes. Uncle. I'll be careful.

—And come home, boy. Whatever you do, come home in the end.

—I will, Uncle. Thank you.

—He was the best of us, your father. I wonder what would have happened if I'd gone north with him?

But James could not answer. The familiar image of Sir Ruthven faded inexorably from his mind. He was not there any longer; his counsel was still, and for a brief moment of sure knowledge, James knew that he would never hear it clearly again. What his uncle had to give him had been given, honestly and generously, without limit. The future lay with James alone.

◀ CHAPTER 30 ▶

"I'LL NEED your help," James said. "He would never talk to me alone. Can you do it? You're not too tired?"

She was tired, he knew, but hearing the question, she forced her shoulders back squarely against the carriage seat and lifted her chin in swift, proud denial.

A brief stop at Braeburn for a heavier cloak and a hurried meal of cold meat and wine had refreshed them both, but their buoyant spirits came more from a growing excitement than rest or food. Luisa gripped James' hand with quick intensity.

"What do you want me to say to him?"

"Speak mysteriously. Tell him you have someone waiting in your coach who must talk to him. Make some vague reference to the 'merchandise' from Statia. If you are forced to it, you can tell him I will put it in his hands."

Luisa drew in a sharp breath, almost a gasp.

"I've thought it through, Luisa. I'm sure now. I know what I have to do."

Her hesitation was momentary, barely noticeable. "All right, James. I'll bring him to you."

"Thank you," James said softly. "What a blessed help you are. Don't you even want to know my plans?"

"It isn't necessary. I must learn to be dutiful." Luisa nestled her cowed head against his shoulder and burrowed closer. "Tell me, James. Please?"

James laughed quietly, deep in his throat. His plans were sketchy, incomplete, dependent upon variable forces he could not completely control. The troubled tone of his voice held Luisa silent and tense as he tried to explain. The high-bodied coach rumbled through the darkened city, the rapid clatter of horse echoing heavily, the creaking complaint of harness and springs loud and sharp, magnified in the still, deserted streets.

The coachman drew slowly to a stop. The footman leaped from his box, anchored the rear wheels and detached one of the riding lights from the side before coming back to open the door and let down the folding step. By then Luisa was sitting demurely in her corner, her gown completely masked by her long velvet cloak. She drew the hood up over her head, then leaned forward and let the footman assist her to the street.

From the coach James could hear only the muffled sound of voices from the house that was set back some yards from the curbing. The heavy river fog nearly obscured the lighted lantern the footman was holding for Luisa. Then, after an interminable, fidgetty interval, the lantern seemed to grow brighter again as it was carried back toward the carriage. Under its light James could make out only the dark peaked shadow of Luisa's hooded cloak. Until they were standing just at the door of the coach, he could not clearly see the exceptionally tall, spidery figure of Mr. Aaron Mears, stooped shoulders well back now as he tried to peer through the coach window. He was bare headed, draped in a short dark boat-cloak. Under it dangled a yard of striped night-gown, bared shanks and slippered feet.

"Please step inside, Mr. Mears," James said quietly, offering his hand. "What I have to say will take a minute or two. There's no point in taking cold."

"Who are you, sir?" Mr. Mears demanded in a harsh voice that boomed in the silent street.

"Softly, sir," James said. "Softly. Step in, please. I am James Coult."

"Coult? The same man we talked to in—"

"Yes," James said. To himself he added, but I'm not the same man. I hardly recognize myself.

Mr. Mears entered the carriage, his head stooped low. Luisa closed the door behind them, remaining outside with

the footman to ensure their privacy. Mears perched gingerly on the edge of the seat and glowered at James. "I don't see there's much of anything for you to say, Mr. Coult, not after what you said this afternoon. But I'm a reasonable man. I'm willing to listen for a minute."

"That's all I ask," James said quickly. "First, let me ask if you know what happened to Callum Crutchfield this evening?"

"Yes, I know," Mr. Mears said warily.

"You know that he is dead?" James insisted.

"I was one of the men who carried him to the City Arms and fetched a doctor. Another few hours and we'd have had our merchandise safely away. But for you. But for you, sir."

"How would you like another chance at it?"

Even in the darkness he could sense that Mears stiffened with suspicion.

"What's in your mind?"

"The arms on board *Lady Luisa*. Do you still want them?"

"Want them! By God, if you're making mock of me—"

"I'm not," James said. "The *Lady Luisa's* cargo belongs to me. I want you to have it."

Mr. Mears made a smothered sound. He cleared his throat roughly. "We've been talking to a Mr. Gerardus Bols who seems to think it belongs to him."

"He lies," James said flatly. "The ship is registered to Coult and Company. The cargo was purchased with our company's bills of exchange. I am authorized to dispose of it."

"Well, now—" Mears hesitated.

"You're wondering who should be paid for the cargo?" James asked quickly. "Don't let it trouble you. I haven't asked for payment. I want you to have that cargo. I think I can show you how to get it."

"With half a platoon of Irish lobsterbacks guarding the warehouse?" Mears asked bitterly. "What chance would we have?"

"A good chance. If you have stomach for the hazard?"

Mears rasped a dry hand across his stubble of beard. "I'm a mite old for derring-do," he said dryly, "but all the Liberty Boys ain't so long in the tooth."

"I meant no offense, sir."

"And none is taken. What's your notion?"

"There is a concealed entrance somewhere under the warehouse, Mr. Mears. I don't know where it is, but it can't be hard to find. By now the guards at the warehouse will probably be sound asleep behind their barricades."

"What good does it do—"

"Hear me out, sir. Captain Sephard escaped by that route this afternoon. He mentioned it in my presence. I think we could probably locate the entrance ourselves, but it might be sensible to send your men searching for Sephard's warehousemen. Any of them should know where the entrance is. Once found, we can take a file of men inside, overpower the guards, and open the warehouse. I assume you could find men and carts enough to shift the cargo before sunrise?"

Mears made a sound deep in his throat. "By God," he whispered. "By God! What's the time?"

James squeezed his heavy watch from his pocket and pushed the stem. He tipped the exposed dial toward the dim light from the window and squinted to make out the setting.

"It lacks ten minutes of two o'clock."

"No time to spare if we're to be finished by dawn. Sunday morning, too. Look strange to be wheeling carts through the streets when people are going to church. We'll have to work fast. You reckon Miss Coult might give me the loan of her carriage for an hour or two?"

"I know she'd be honored, sir. Would you rather we waited somewhere else? I'd not like you to think I was prying into your affairs."

Mears turned abruptly, shifting back to see James' face in the faint light. "What changed your mind, young man?" he demanded. "Tell me truly."

James' hands tightened on his swordstick. His voice came thickly from the hot throbbing in his throat but he managed to hold it level and clear.

"Crutchfield's death, mostly," he said slowly. "He was my friend, Mr. Mears. I don't know how to explain to you. I'm not sure I understand myself. I was sent to New York on a mission for my uncle. I tried to close my eyes to everything else. When Callum Crutchfield was murdered, I could close my eyes no longer. I had to look at myself, Mr. Mears, and it wasn't a pretty sight."

"You changed almighty sudden, it seems to me," Mears said somberly.

"It might seem so," James admitted. "I've been trying for a long time to be the person my uncle wanted me to be. I haven't done very well at it."

"I can't see how—"

"It's not a simple matter, Mr. Mears," James said with some sharpness. "I'm not used to explaining myself. Maybe you will understand better if I tell you that I have been warned that tomorrow I will be arrested for sedition. Colonel Cochran pretends to believe that I am responsible for the munitions smuggled on *Lady Luisa*."

James listened to an eloquent silence. Then he thought he heard Mr. Mears chuckle.

"Laugh, Mr. Mears," he said tightly. "Don't smother it. You'll not get many chances like this."

"I wasn't laughing, sir," Mr. Mears said heavily. "I'll laugh at no man who is tasting the whip for the first time. We've all of us got scars, too. No, it was something else that came to my mind, Mr. Coult."

"What is it?"

"You say you want us to have the merchandise. What do you expect to get out of it for yourself?"

"I'm not completely sure. I think—"

"Let me say it clearer. You think Colonel Bloody Cochran is going to arrest you for treason. What's his basis for the charge? Only the cargo of the *Lady Luisa*. Am I right? If that cargo disappears by morning, Cochran's evidence disappears with it. That's correct, isn't it? Is that what's behind your sudden generosity?"

"My God," James said softly. "I never even thought of that."

"Don't trifle with me, Mr. Coult. Answer me straight out, one man to another."

"The answer is no," James said stiffly. "I don't care for your tone, Mr. Mears, but your attitude may have some justification I hadn't thought of removing evidence. Callum Crutchfield died just a few hours ago and I have been greatly upset in my mind since then. But for me, he would be alive. I blame myself, sir. I don't ask you to understand. But I must do what I can to set it right. I want you to have that cargo. Do you accept?"

After a long still moment James saw Mr. Mears move his head deliberately in a slow series of judicious nods.

"Yes," he said. "I accept. And right gladly. I don't like prodding at you, Mr. Coult, but I have responsibilities too. If you should get some good out of this night's work, why I can't see how that would do us any harm, as long as we get our merchandise. But I'd better warn you, Mr. Coult. If anybody sees you along with us, it won't matter whether the evidence is gone or not. Cochran will hang you anyway. Do you still want to come along?"

"I'm coming with you," James said.

◀ CHAPTER 31 ▶

ALONG THE RIVER thick mists were beginning to pale toward the east. The heavy fog that lay over the city seemed to drift down and the tops of buildings in the distance gradually grew visible against the darker sky.

Another hour at the most, James thought irritably. He squirmed on the carriage seat beside Luisa, hunched forward to stare out the small window toward the long bank of wagon doors leading to the warehouse. They had been waiting almost two hours for someone to point out the concealed entrance. More than fifty men and two dozen carts were standing idle in deserted, darkened streets, with pickets posted to warn of military patrols. James and three others had poked and prodded at every inch of the warehouse front, hampered by the need for silence, unable to use even a dark-lamp for more than a flickering instant. There was an entrance. There had to be. But its value depended upon how well it was concealed, and this one had been hidden with great cunning. There was nothing they could do but wait, and hope one of the liberty Boys out scouring the city would manage to locate some of Sephard's men who knew the secret.

Luisa was sleeping restlessly, wrapped warmly in her cloak, murmuring softly to herself whenever she was disturbed by James' fidgeting. After trying unsuccessfully to sit still, James pushed down the doorlatch and stepped restlessly down to the cobbled street. Luisa stirred and he touched her with a gentle, reassuring hand, waited until she dozed again before closing the door behind him.

Both coachman and footman were down off their box, thrashing their arms in heavy greatcoats. Their team had been blanketed against the cold. Long plumes of vapor poured from the horses' nostrils with every breath. James walked past toward the corner and stepped into the doorway where Mr. Mears was waiting.

"Can't wait much longer, Mr. Coult," Mears whispered. "Now we've called the boys out, I'm thinking we might do best to send some of them over the roof to the quay and see if they can storm the guards from there."

"No chance," James said positively. "That's an old warehouse and the roof probably wouldn't hold them. If it did, there would be so much noise the guard would be awake and waiting by the time they got across. No, we'll have to go in silently somehow. We might take a boatload of men down the river. But first let's take another look at the warehouse. Is your dark-lamp still lighted?"

Mears grunted. There was a clicking sound, a rising scent of over-heated metal. Then Mears said, "Right here. But I don't know what good—"

"Let's have another look anyway," James insisted.

The high resolve that had earlier excited Mears and his men was beginning to ebb away now, would probably die with the first streak of dawn in the sky. James was determined not to let that happen. He could not issue orders to the Sons of Liberty, but he was still able to influence Aaron Mears, though he suspected that influence was dwindling, too.

They walked softly in single file across the narrow roadway, huddling in a shadow when a distant lantern was carried across an intersecting street by a noisy, foot-scraping patrol. They approached the warehouse with slow caution and knelt at the corner of the building. James looked up and down the deserted street.

"Light," he said. "Quickly."

Mears slid back the metal shield of his dark-lamp and directed a tiny beam at the stone corner post. He moved the light along to the juncture of a broad oaken beam and held it there while James poked, prodded, pulled with his bare fingers. It had to be here. There could be no channel in the stone walls, and the high wagon doors came down to the surface of the street. The six feet of oaken beam at either end of the warehouse offered the best possibility. But it seemed to be solid, weathered evenly and roughly. Jagged splinters caught James' fingers constantly as he investigated, in the dark now because even the small beam from the dark-lamp was dangerous to use for long.

Nothing. No single inch of the beam showed any indication of a crack. No matter how James shoved and pulled he could sense no lack of solidity. Finally he straightened and stood gasping quietly, leaning against the wall.

"It's here," Mears said softly. "It has to be here." But his voice carried no conviction, merely stubborn intent.

"Yes," James said. He moved his head away from a projecting metal bolthead. "It's here somewhere. Maybe there's a—Put that light up here for a moment."

A hidden passageway would have to be protected by a sturdy sort of door. And that door would have to open from

either side, or its value would be greatly reduced. The moment James' hand touched the projecting head of the iron bolt, a wild, unaccountable sureness leaped into his mind.

The dark-lamp's brief light showed a large bolthead the size of a man's fist. Far larger than it needs to be, James thought. That's what I noticed when I touched it—the size. The bolt tied a wooden stringer to the oaken beam and it should have been as immovable as the beam itself. It was, but when James pushed, he could feel the entire beam move slightly.

It shifted to the left a bare inch, but enough to tell James that he had found the door.

"This is it," he whispered in a harsh, strained tone. "Get your men in line. Hurry."

It was a simple, strong device that locked the door. No wonder I couldn't find any gap in that beam, James thought. There wasn't any. But by shoving to the left on that huge bolthead, he could make the entire beam, obviously only a plank, slide away, leaving a narrow opening some three feet wide, that ran from street level to the shadowed eaves overhead. No casual inspection would find anything unusual in the construction of the warehouse. And the door could be opened as easily from the other side of the dark passageway.

James turned and forced himself to wait quietly. He drew in long deep breaths to control his rising excitement. His hands were steady, he noted with some satisfaction.

The dozen men that Mears had selected as his assault force came running silently across the cobbles. Burly men, most of them, thick and wide, though they varied in height. Armed to the teeth, as like as not, James suspected. The prospect of a foolish accident made James anxiously nervous. He held his arms wide, blocking the dark entrance. His whisper was a stern warning.

"Bludgeons only. If you've pistols, leave them at half-cock and put them in your pockets. Remember, men, no sound out of any of you or we're all dead. Now wait here a moment."

James took Mears by the elbow and walked him away from the warehouse.

"Send someone to concentrate your carters near the warehouse. We'll have to hurry now. As soon as we get inside, I'll find my way to the little door that's set in that first wagon door. We may need help, so be sure your men are ready to come in as soon as I get the door open."

Aaron Mears clamped long bony fingers around James' hand, nearly squashing the knuckles. "Bless you, boy. We'll be waiting. God go with you."

James left him there after taking the dark-lamp that hung from his belt. A light would be perilous in that passageway, he knew, for there might be chinks that would let the light shine through into the warehouse. But he might need it to find the door at the far end.

"Remember, no noise," he whispered. He slipped in through the narrow gap, one hand tapping silently at the stone wall to his right, the other stretched forward, feeling for any obstruction. The small dark-lamp in his pocket gave off a scorched smell that seemed suitable to the dank, musty stench of the passageway.

After three long strides, James' outstretched hand touched a solid barrier. He tapped at it as high as he could reach, feeling only firm timber. Of course, he thought suddenly. Sephard had said the passage led under the warehouse. This is where we start crawling. James turned to tap the shoulder of the man behind him. He leaned over to whisper. "Stop. Wait. Pass the word."

Sibilant whispers repeated the word as James knelt and fumbled with both hands for the tunnel. It was easily found, well-defined. Floor beams nearly three feet thick were set six feet apart. The passage lay in the gap between them. James rose. He whispered, "Hands and knees. Keep contact with the man ahead. No crowding."

The worst of it was the rotten stench of tidal mud and dead fish and the rats that obviously infested the entire riverfront. James' hands leaned wrist-deep in the foul debris of decades. Rats pattered away from his approach, squeaking in protest. James could hardly breathe in the fetid atmosphere. He could feel sweat beading on his face, splashing down on his dirty hands. His knees and toes scraped up mounds of soft filth with each movement.

He discovered the end of the tunnel by the simple process of bumping his head against an upright beam. Carefully he searched upward, finding himself in a narrow chamber. Between the walls, probably. This was the end of the secret passageway. Three other men were able to stand beside him, crushing close together. The others had to wait in the cramped tunnel until James could find the doorway. For all his urgency James was careful to send a message to them before he began his search.

Waiting in that foul passage must have been agonizing, but no man groaned or muttered. The air would not be adequate for long, but James did not anticipate any difficulty in finding the door latch. Simplicity and sturdiness were the hallmarks of the hidden passage. Once understood, the secrets were easily found.

It took almost a full minute, but this time James did not investigate obscure or minute objects. He tweaked, pushed, pulled all beams and metal straps that offered purchase to his hand, and as he had expected, the answer was simple. A wooden peg the thickness of his wrist was let into a wall strut just above waist level. A slow steady pressure to the left would slide a wide-yard section to one side.

James leaned gradually against the latch. The wall-section resisted him for a moment, then shifted with a high shrill squealing sound that seemed loud enough to wake the King himself. James waited, hardly daring to breathe. If the guard investigated that noise, they were all dead, trapped in the narrow passage. It would be better to charge out and take their chances in an open fight. James put his eye to the narrow opening, squinting into the small bay of the warehouse where he and Luisa had seen the stored munitions. For some reason the high doors leading to the shielded quay were standing open and by the faint light from the river, James could see dimly outlined piles of barrels and chests, heaped to the ceiling. The side door that led into the warehouse was ajar. Beyond it no light was visible.

James stayed there for a long silent moment, unable to hear a sound, or to see anything moving. He straightened again and leaned his weight firmly against the peg. Once started, the wall-section slid back with no squealing, though the low, rumbling sound it made put James' teeth on edge. He held the first man's arm and bent to whisper, "Come out softly. Move left toward the open door, and wait."

One by one the dirty-faced men filed from the narrow entrance, moving on the outer edges of their feet, with their thick oaken bludgeons held at the ready. Their eyes shone in the faint light. They formed together silently, quivering with eagerness, but waiting until the last man had made his way from the tunnel and stood panting softly beside them.

James touched the shoulders of the first two men. "Outside to the quay. Overpower any guard posted there. Don't move till I signal you."

Half the remainder were detailed to file through the small door and charge toward the high wagon doors letting onto the street. They were to find the guards, leaving the doors to James. The others were to head toward the quay from inside the warehouse to seize any guards posted there.

"Silently," James warned. "As long as we can, let's be silent."

James led the way to the small door, took the knob in one hand, then turned to signal the men detailed to the quay.

When they were out of sight, he pulled the door open quickly and lunged through. He stepped aside until every man was in the vast chamber of the warehouse.

Only then did he remember he had forgotten to furnish himself with a weapon. He wasted no time lamenting the fact. He pulled the smoldering dark-lamp from his pocket and ran silently toward the street front of the warehouse. He could hear the Liberty Boys coursing the length of the big room, floor boards creaking alarmingly. There was no other sound. James found his way to the small lancet door, drew the bolts, and pulled it open. An eager platoon of armed men poured through, fanning out through the warehouse, not waiting for instructions. James then dared to slide the shield back from his dark-lamp.

"The guard, man," Mears said urgently. "What about the guard?"

"I don't know," James said in slow bewilderment. "I can't understand where—"

In turning from the door James directed the lamp's beam toward a snug little corner made by crates and bales. Bolts of cloth had been used for padding and in the cozy nest ten men sprawled at comfortable ease, their uniform coats unbuttoned, belts and armament racked in true regimental fashion off to one side where they wouldn't be troublesome. James stared unbelieving, as the light roused a wide-jawed sergeant who grumbled something in an undertone, brought one beefy arm up to shield his eyes, and promptly went off to sleep again.

Mr. Mears was the first to laugh. A thin titter escaped his austere lips, more in shock than humor. But it served to set off a gale of bellowing laughter that eventually brought the drowsy guard awake, snorting and coughing, yawning lazily until they realized what had happened.

It said much for the discipline that Aaron Mears exercised in the Sons of Liberty that he was able to bring back to his hilarious, bellowing men a sense of urgency. Only a few minutes were lost in trussing the guard like fowls for the roasting spit.

"And not one of them saw a thing," Mears said exultantly. "They can't identify a single man of us."

Half a dozen lanterns were hung from the rafters and the waiting carts drove into the warehouse to be loaded with the munitions from *Lady Luisa*. The Liberty Boys worked with all the speed of Sephard's smugglers, but none of the silence. The noise seemed deafening to James and twice he tried to get Mears to interfere.

"I'll not stop them," Mears laughed. "Let the lads have their fun. What if we do run into a military patrol? I've got more than a hundred men outside on the streets now and there'll be a thousand in an hour or two. What can a few Lobsterbacks do to us?"

"You'll fight them?"

"If we're forced to it," Mears said more soberly. "Things are going to be changed in New York now, I'll tell you that, Mr. Coult. We have the power now, and, by God, we'll use it. But we won't go asking for a fight."

"Very well," James said. "I'll leave you to it then, Mr. Mears. I'm glad I was able to help."

"Where are you off to?"

"I'm not sure, sir. Braeburn at first. Then we'll have to see what develops."

"Don't be in any rush, Mr. Coult. We need men like you here in New York these days. There's almighty damned few with wit enough to see what's happening, what's going to happen. I'd take it as a kindness if you would think of—"

The rolling thunderous rhythm of horses' hoofs echoed along the street outside, sounding like a troop of cavalry at the charge. Mears broke off in sudden alarm and hurried to the lighted doorway with James at his heels.

The solid grey fog was lifting with the first light of dawn but the approaching horsemen were not yet visible. Disorganized squads of Liberty Boys came running across the street toward the warehouse, muskets slanting, ready to repel any attack. The men at work loading the carts snatched up pistols and muskets and ranged themselves behind Aaron Mears.

"Mr. Mears!" a voice shouted shrilly above the sound of galloping horses. "Where is Aaron Mears?"

"Be careful, boys," Mears shouted. "That's young Blakey. I know his voice. Over here, boy," he roared through cupped hands.

The running horses swept into view from the mist, galloping hard and dangerously up the cobbled street toward the warehouse. James felt a tug at his sleeve and turned to look down into the grave, quiet eyes of Luisa. Her taciturn coachmen poised himself behind her in a truculent stance, a brass-bound blunderbuss in both hands, staring with open challenge at the raffish Liberty Boys jostling from every side.

"You are very dirty, my dear," Luisa whispered. "What have you been doing?"

James laughed easily and took her hand. "Crawling under the warehouse to surprise a pack of sleeping soldiers."

"Sleeping? Really?"

"Every man of them," James said. "I wonder what story they'll devise for Colonel Cochran?"

Seven horsemen followed the first to the warehouse. They pulled up and dismounted to lead their horses, holding back to let two men approach first.

"Well, young Blakey," Mears called out amiably, "what devil is chasing you?"

"Mr. Dow sent me, sir, as soon as he heard. This here's Israel Bissel, the post-rider from Boston." The boy jerked his chin to indicate the slump-shouldered, weary man beside him. "Brought great news, Mr. Bissel did."

"I'm listening, boy. What news? You're looking almighty tired, Mr. Bissel."

"Rode from Boston in three days," young Blakey said in a piping voice full of admiration. "Going right on to Philadelphia. We came along to escort him as far as the ferry."

"Must have wore out a lot of good horses, Bissel. What for?"

The post-rider coughed and rubbed a grimy hand across his long jaw. He closed his eyes briefly and shook his head as if to rouse himself.

"I left the despatch with Mr. Dow, sir," he said in a hoarse, grating tone. "But I guess I can tell you what's in most of it. The British struck at us—what day is today?"

"Sunday morning," Mears said impatiently. "Speak up, man. What happened?"

"Last Wednesday it was. The British sent out a column to seize the militia stores at Lexington and Concord, and the whole country rose against them. We killed a hundred of them—British regulars they were! We whupped them good, chased them back into Boston. Now we've got them penned up in the city. The town is surrounded. We've got old Gates and his soldiers fenced up like a herd of sheep!"

"Great Lord Jehovah," Mears said fervently.

"James," Luisa said softly. "What is he saying? What does it all mean?"

"The beginning," James said. "The beginning of something new in the world."

◀ CHAPTER 32 ▶

THE LOWER waterfront of the city was nearly deserted when the Coult carriage rolled down the cobbled slope to Whitehall Slip and drew up along the wharf where a ship's launch was moored. Sullen, silent soldiers watched from the walls and embrasures of Fort George. The British Union flag still flew over the fort. It was raised nowhere else in New York.

Being nearest to the door, James Coult alighted first. He stepped to one side as Count d'Array let the footman assist him to the timbered wharf. Both lifted their hats as Luisa appeared from the coach. The footman withdrew to help the coachman and two sailors with the heavy baggage.

This was departure in defeat for d'Array. James could think of nothing to say to him. Pity, or even sympathy would be distasteful to a man with d'Array's pride, and in simple truth, James was not capable of pretending regret for the recent occurrences in New York. Luisa laced her arms through their elbows and marched them off, three abreast, toward the windy tip of the long pier.

Bare-masted ships still lined the quays, but out in the anchorage, were only two ships, both flying the British ensign at their forepeaks.

"We'll be sorry to see you go, d'Array," James said in a brusque tone. "Surely there's no great hurry now. Why not stay on a bit longer?"

D'Array smiled briefly, a grimace of empty politeness. He leaned forward to look at James. "There speaks the contented man. But I am not content, my friend, so I shall take my melancholy where it may be of some use. Every hothead in France will be fanning the blaze you have helped to light here. I must try to stop them before the flames destroy France herself."

James nodded soberly. He studied d'Array's thin, strained face, remembering the fears that tormented the Count. "There was no alternative," he said. "Neither here nor in Boston."

"I know," d'Array admitted with a wry smile. "Given stupid policies and stupid men to administer them, revolt is inevitable."

ble. I cannot argue. The facts are clear, the conclusion inescapable. In fact, it is the very clarity of the example that gives me hope."

"Sir?"

"We French are not more wise than the English. Our policies, our ministers are equally stupid. But the example of America is very clear before us, and people may be persuaded to change. That may be too much to hope for, but I must do what I can."

"I—I don't know whether to wish you well or not, d'Array."

"James!" Luisa pinched his arm sharply.

"D'Array takes my meaning, dear," James said with an apologetic shrug for the Count. "No one can guess what may happen here. If things go badly, a few friends in France might mean the difference between success and defeat."

"It would also mean the ruin of France," d'Array said with quiet, firm conviction. "There will be help from France, of course. The opportunity to damage England will be irresistible. But I hope we can limit our assistance to informal, unofficial channels. If France herself intervenes, then France will be destroyed as a great nation. You can appreciate that such a prospect is vastly distressing to me."

"Possibly it won't come to that," James said uncomfortably. "No one means to establish the American colonies as independent nations, or even as one nation, banding the colonies together. Either would be suicidal. We couldn't exist a month without England's protection. But there will be months, probably years, of debate and wrangling, maybe even more fighting, before England will be ready to speak of compromise and conciliation. Ultimately, the offers will come, and we will accept them, provided we are granted all the rights of free-born subjects. The day is gone when England could think of every American as a sort of indentured servant. France's help isn't necessary in such a program."

"No," d'Array murmured skeptically, "but that program will not endure for long, I fear. The English King sees your brief revolt here as a personal affront to his majesty. He will not hear of conciliation until he has tried to beat you to your knees. You will fight back, of course, and in fighting you will become more and more stiff-necked until independence seems the only acceptable solution to your troubles. No, my friend, I have no faith in your dream of reconciliation with England. You have committed an act of war, and it will be war to the death, as always. There is no other kind of war."

"I think you are wrong, d'Array. None of us have even discussed the possibility of independence. We don't want—"

"We?" d'Array demanded. "You say 'we' quite often to-day, sir. Have you identified yourself so completely with the rebel faction?"

James felt himself flushing, though not from embarrassment. "I'm not a member of the local Committee," he said simply, "but I know most of them and I share their views. I have been asked to help Mr. Robert Morris establish a regular channel of supplies to maintain the siege at Boston. I may be useful. I was trained as a merchant, you may recall."

"I remember," d'Array said in an odd tone. "I also remember something about the *Lady Luisa*. Your ship now, I believe? I noticed workmen setting new rigging on her this morning. You are sending her out again?"

"Coult and Company still owns three warehouses filled with munitions at Statia," James said stiffly. "Those arms are desperately needed here. The British will be slow to attack us if they know we are able to make a strong resistance."

D'Array chuckled. "There is an irony here that possibly I can appreciate more than any of us. *Lady Luisa* again carries munitions, again defies British law, but the situation is, oh, so very different from her last voyage, eh?"

"Yes," James muttered. "I dare say."

"Still, I wish her luck," d'Array said amiably. "And you, sir. What are your plans? I am sure your uncle will be asking me when I get to London."

"I am taking the *Lady Luisa* out myself," James said. "As for my plans, I have explained them at some length in the letter you were kind enough to take. I am not closing the New York branch. I will manage it myself, at least for the time. Uncle Ruthven will not have to worry about his profits. Try to make him understand my position, d'Array. With your formal statement in evidence, he will have no difficulty defending himself against any charge of sedition. I doubt if a charge will be made now. Colonel Cochran will be too busy defending himself to trouble Uncle Ruthven. The old scoundrel is bottled up in Fort George and I don't think he's capable of any more mischief."

"No, your uncle will be quite safe. Unhappy though, I suspect. But it is a natural law, apparently, that the young men should dash off on some glorious, hare-brained adventure. He will understand, sir, trust me for that. But he will probably not understand why you are taking a valuable ship out of this harbor in the face of an effective blockade."

James snorted. "There's nothing effective about the blockade," he said bluntly. "The British have the Narrows guarded by a frigate, that's all. We'll slip around to the Hell Gate by night and pass through at dawn. We'll round

Montauk Point and be well out to sea before anyone notices we're gone. Good God, d'Array, you don't think I'd take Luisa with me if I thought there was any real danger?"

"Ah," d'Array murmured, with a meaningful glance for Luisa.

"Mr. Bols made the Caribbean sound entrancing," Luisa said, looking down demurely. "Even if he was trying to frighten us."

"Mr. Bols," d'Array said slowly. "And what has become of Mr. Bols, I wonder?"

James shrugged. "No one has seen him recently. He seems to have vanished into the night."

"An elusive fellow," d'Array agreed. "I still have business with Mr. Bols. If you should see him, in Statia or elsewhere, you might remind him of my continuing interest."

"It wouldn't be kind of me to frighten him so," James said easily. "But if I should see him, I'll give him your message."

"Yes, I wish you would." D'Array drew in a quick, decisive breath. He disengaged himself casually from Luisa's light grasp and turned to look up at the city outlined against the lowering sky. "A strange place," he said almost to himself. "I wonder what will be happening here in the next few months. Do you and your rebel friends have complete control at the moment, my friend?"

"Complete enough," James said with evident satisfaction. "The plans were drawn long ago. The Liberty Boys rang the church bells and had their men parading the streets an hour after the post-rider arrived with the news of Lexington and Concord. They bottled up the Royal Irish in their barracks on the Commons and chased every other soldier or member of the government to the fort or one of the British ships. The Army stores of gunpowder were seized and about a thousand stand of muskets. The two sloops loaded with supplies for General Gage in Boston were confiscated. All that within a few hours."

"Excellent planning, as you say," d'Array conceded. "So King Mob rules here, as he does in London at times, eh?"

"I don't believe there's any valid comparison, d'Array," James objected. "When the mob boils over in London, there's no control whatever. Even John Wilkes can't ship it into line. King George hides under his bed and refuses to show his face. There's nothing like that in New York. Here you can sense a definite element of discipline. Not enough, I'll grant you, but enough so that our situation can't be compared with the terrible savagery of the London mob."

"But your mob has tasted blood now. It knows its own

power. I wonder if it will still respond to discipline a year from now?"

"I hope that a year from now there will be no excuse for its existence," James said.

"Let us both hope so. I know what the mob is like in my own country and my blood runs cold at the mere suggestion that the jacquerie might control France for even one minute."

D'Array turned back briskly and clapped his hands together, a light, conclusive gesture. "So. My baggage is loaded and the boatmen wait for me. I have said more than I meant to say, but no word was said in bitterness. We have all learned something in these brief few days, eh? We can part good friends. Your uncle will be proud when he hears what I have to report to him. Would you like to add anything about—ah—" The Count flicked a shrewd glance at Luisa and smiled, waiting.

"I have already written Uncle Ruthven about it, d'Array," James said. "I'd like his blessing. Luisa and I will be married on board ship tomorrow. Not a long engagement, I know, but I daren't give her time to reconsider."

"And I am the first to hear?" D'Array beamed his delight. He fumbled in his pockets with both hands, rummaging hastily. "What gift can I find on such short notice? Ah, a small medal for the lovely Miss Luisa. This is the saint who smooths the road for all travelers. I charge him to guard you well. And for Mr. Coult, what? Nothing, I fear. But wait!"

The Count brought out a bulging purse and fished inside carefully, opening an inner compartment with two fingers. "Here. For you the first louis-d' or struck with the head of the young Louis XVI. His Majesty gave it to me when we visited the Royal Mint together last year. Riches, great wealth for monsieur. Safety with happiness for madame. It is fitting. And now I must go."

D'Array stepped back two paces, brought his plumed hat sweeping to the dock, bowing so low that the tip of his rapier pointed straight up to the sky.

"Adieu, mes amis. Think well of me—and of yourselves."

He turned on one jeweled heel and moved away briskly. The waiting boatmen steadied the launch as he swung down the ladder. Bow oar shoved off and then both rowers settled to their work. D'Array sat erect and relaxed on the middle thwart, not looking back until the small boat veered around the stern of the anchored ship. Seeing James and Luisa still at the edge of the dock, he rose and waved his hat in a wide slow circle. Then his boat passed out of sight behind the ship.

James and Luisa walked back along the timbered wharf. The city seemed very quiet now. Many people had left, running in panic. Many more would leave soon. The future for everyone was uncertain, dark as the heavy storm that gathered in the distance. No man dared guess what the morning might bring.

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